

The Children's Rebellion

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Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Children of the Stars
Collections:	Starr's fic recs :D , Fictopia , great reads , science fiction , mmm favs , SBI Fics for the soul , saviors of aerois :> , thinksmoon's collection of best sbi fics , recommended to me , DSMP_favs , TommyInnit to a Trip in Our Favorite Rocket Pirate Ship , Fics That Make Me Sob , incomplete v good fics , Amesfaves , Less trauma but still trauma but also happy? , pumpkin's picks , It's 3am and I am sobbing , Fics to give my sister death threats if she doesn't read them , International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs , TOMMY FICS TO

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The Children's Rebellion

by [Aria_Cinabun](#)

Summary

His name was Tommy Innes, and he was born to touch the stars.

Of course, touching the stars was going to have to wait, because he'd lost that dream the moment his parents had died when he was ten years old—the moment he had watched that starship explosion and felt a bit of his heart die with them. He'd lost that dream when he was transported to prison and then to a place called Pogtopia.

He'd lost that dream when he watched hundreds of children starve on the streets of Pogtopia. When he and two friends become the lone survivors of the Red Planet's Genocide. When they were rescued, and he was captured again.

But maybe—maybe one day, he would regain that dream. Maybe he would hunt down the mass murderer that had executed his friends and gain his revenge—but that day was not now, and now he sat in a prison and stared at the faraway stars.

Perhaps there would be people that he could call family again. People he would see again—people whom he had lost years ago. One day.

Because he was an Avian, born to be forever alone amongst broken stars.

And Avians did not fall unless they wanted to.

or

a science fiction fic about rebellion

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Fight Me, Bitch

Chapter Notes

First and foremost, this story is dark. It has semi-realistic events—the characters are not perfect (by far), and many of them give horrible advice. If you feel like you need help, please contact the National Suicide Prevention line at (800-273-8255).

I also do not enjoy giving out trigger warnings at the beginning of chapters. This is a personal choice, as I feel it gives away too much. If you do not like, do not read.

Here is the list of the following trigger warnings that will take place during the story:

Yelling/Shouting
Racism/Xenophobia
Blood & Gore
Suicidal Thoughts/Attempt
Panic Attacks
Manipulation
Possible Minor Character Death
Possible Major Character Death
Murder/Executions
Child Abuse
Drug Abuse
Starvation
Needles
Mass Genocide/Shootings
Torture
Emotional Manipulation

If you do not feel like you will be able to handle ANY of these, then please exit this fic immediately. This is your first, and only, warning that these triggers will take place somewhere in this story.

This title comes from a movie that we watched in school called the Children's Rebellion (it wasn't that good, but I liked the title) and I added Star Trek and Hunger Games and Percy Jackson aspects to it. It was also inspired minutely by the Star Trek fic [You Don't Have To \(Say Yes\)](#) (minus the sexual content, because, you know, I don't write that type of stuff and they're minors). One or two direct quotes are taken from this fic as well.

If you are still here, then happy reading!

NOTE:

Tommy's last name is pronounced "Inn-is", like "Innit" with an "ess" sound replacing the "it" sound. Keep that in mind as you read, and don't be one of those people that pronounce Innes like "Eines".

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"You may have heard of him."

For such a powerful species, Tommy Innes sure felt powerless in such a situation.

The orange jumpsuits that made up Tommy's fellow prisoners' uniforms did no justice to the pitiful scene, though it did solidify his contempt for the other inmates. He crossed his arms and tapped his foot against the metal floor, blonde hair falling across his face—much to his general annoyance.

“Come on, kid, hand over the fucking food,” the leader said—how fucking cliché. He was a Phantom—that meant that he had a shock collar strapped around his neck so he couldn't return to his Phantom state, though the pastiness that marked him of his birth species made Tommy think of a boiled egg.

God, he hadn't had a good boiled egg in *years*.

"No thanks," Tommy drawled, raising an eyebrow and glancing down at his plate. It was made entirely of greenery and a few fruit pieces—the Avians' dish—his race, long gone. His hands were white where he clutched it because his food *wasn't* about to be stolen, not now, not after so long.

"Listen, *kid*—" Tommy flushed at the statement, anger filling him. Sure, he was the youngest one at the high-security space station of a prison, but he wasn't a *kid*.

He hadn't been a kid for a long time. Not ever since his father whispered words in his ear that needed to be memorized, not since his father had died in a space explosion that had sent Tommy's escape pod floating in space until the Arachnids had picked him up with their beady red eyes and chirped at him with their annoying teeth. He, being ten at the time—nearly seven years ago—hadn't spoken anything, and had played dumb. He hadn't been a kid since the fields of golden grass turned brown; since the feelings of hunger, since the executions that made him curl into a ball at night and cry.

Tommy was an Avian, but to the rest of the prisoners, he was Human. To his knowledge, he was one of the last living Avians in the galaxy. His father had been a ship captain—he'd just been transporting Piglin and Hoglin citizens to their home planet when they had been attacked from nowhere.

It had made no sense to ten-year-old Tommy at the time.

Of course, he knew better now. He'd gotten the gist of what his family actually did for a living. He knew why the Avians were nearly extinct. He knew to keep his secrets hidden.

Still.

He wasn't a kid.

"No," he said again.

"I don't know if you've noticed, *kid*," the Phantom snapped, and Tommy was growing quite exhausted of his repetitiveness. "But there are four of us and one of you."

"So get some more guys, and we'll make it even," he said with a slight smirk.

He almost sighed when the first punch came swinging at his face. Almost. These guys were too predictable - stupid thugs of some caravan some specie had decided to start after their supply ships' continuous attack.

He ducked the first punch and charged the Phantom, kneeling him directly in the gut with a flash of victory. The man dropped—and Tommy considered a fleeting feeling of triumph until a fist

smashed into his cheek.

Whoops. He'd forgotten about the other individuals.

Oh, well.

His lip was split, blood running down his face as he turned to face the Enderian, a smirk growing wider even as the pain from moving his mouth deepened. Unfortunately, the Enderian stood a good five feet away—his fists raised, and Tommy felt a sting of annoyance that he would have to grow closer.

Stupid Enderians. This guy could fucking teleport—a rare ability among his species. Tommy had only known one other person that could do it. And this pathetic person was using it on *him*. In a prison.

On another note, the idiot had used his racial abilities. That meant he would be in trouble. Already, Tommy could see Arachnid guards filtering into the facility, black phasers out, and set to the blue state of stunning. He backed off, hands raised in the air, the superior smirk staying on his face as he watched the Arachnid guards circle the Enderian and the downed Phantom.

"What happened?" one of the Arachnid guards barked at the other two 'buddies' the lead Phantom had brought with him to harass Tommy out of his saggy-looking green leaves.

"He stole Corlin's lunch," the other Phantom said, pointing a hand at Tommy. They turn his guns to him, and Tommy held up his hands.

"Woah, woah, gentlemen," he said scornfully, jerking his thumb at the lunch tray at the nearby aluminum table. "As you can see, this lunch is green with golden apples and way too much balsamic vinegar." He tilted his head victoriously. If possible, the Phantom grew paler. "It's my special vegetarian meal—not an Enderian or a Phantom-made meal." He shook his head, trying his best to widen his blue eyes to garner pitiful stares. Some of the Arachnids hold a soft spot for him because he hadn't gotten here like the other rebels have—through space battles and warzones and idiotic attempts at rescue missions. "They were trying to take it from me. *Me!* A poor Human boy was trying to eat. I really wasn't trying for trouble, sirs, truly."

"Bullshit," one of the guards said, but they nodded, unable to truly incriminate him when the actual evidence was in front of them. "Prisoner T-869, please return to your cell. We'll deal with these four." It wasn't like the guards could tell the other prisoners that he was an Avian—he was too *special*, too *important*. But they knew an Avian meal when they saw one—and that meal was his.

"Preferably harshly," he murmured, winking at the standing three and making sure to trod on Mr. Boss Phantom's hand as he stepped past. A sense of giddy joy filled him as he bit into the golden apple that he'd filched from his plate—golden apples were given to Avians in place of other necessary items that the prison refused to gather for a few amount of Avians they had in the faculty. Or, rather, the singular Avian that they had. He loved golden apples.

"Oh, and T-869?"

Tommy turned around, confusion filling him at the calling. He hadn't expected to be let out until dinner, relishing in his victory with his books and the silence. One of the guards was talking to him, the others gathering up the four who had dared to bother Tommy. He tilted his head, acknowledging the question.

"Don't fuck up your cellmate."

Shock filled him, but Tommy forced the questions back down their throat, taking a large bite of the golden apple to keep his silence as he walked back down the cell halls.

A *cellmate*. For the second time in all his years in the Wasteland, he was getting a cellmate. He did not doubt that after the events of the first person, that this one would be bad—if not, somehow, worse.

The Arachnids, while terrible people, were intelligent enough to grasp that ten-year-old Tommy wouldn't fluctuate well with others there, especially garnering the reality that most of the characters in the penitentiary were disastrous middle-aged criminals. His ten-year-old self would have no doubt been mutilated in some way—and he knew that some of the guards held sympathy for the youngest one there.

Which. Despite being the species that had murdered his parents and had handed him over to—had *murdered* his parents, Tommy had some appreciation for that. Despite hating them.

He was just a kid, after all. He wasn't a war criminal—only the son of two very crafty, very *dead* war criminals. At least, from the Arachnid's point of view, his family had been war criminals. He didn't even know the crimes his father had committed—all he had heard when he was brought in, trembling and crying and shouldering the realization that his family was *dead*—something about charlatans and fraudulent liars, perhaps on both his aunt and father's accounts.

Though, perhaps his family was a bit fragmentary. When he was younger, he thought his father was married to the other woman around—it turned out she was a technical aunt. She wasn't related to his father in any way, and so his *mother* became his aunt, though on occasion he called her Mama and her face softened from its usual stoic expression, and she'd pull him close in a warm grip and talked about traveling the stars with him. His birth mother had died when he was three to—

Well.

Finding something—something that had inadvertently ended in the death of both of his parental figures, something that he carried in his subconscious with a vise clamp—the only thing that he would ever have from them—was something that he both hated and loved. He wanted to fling the memory away, but all he could do was seize it close and remember the strands of numbers that his father had whispered to him before dying in an explosion next to the brilliant glare of a cerulean star.

There was nothing in that memory that he much remembered besides the desperation in his voice as they pushed him into the most proximal escape pod and swore him up and down that he would not recount to the enemy—in this case, the Arachnids—of his familial ties. He did not understand, for they were mere equipment operators who transported people in this circumstance.

He did not understand, but he did as he was told, because he was intelligent enough to perceive that they would not have advised him that without discernment.

He understood, now, what they were.

But—they had never performed missions like sneak into a palace or assassinate a monarch. So that had motivated Tommy to assume that they were not, in fact, spies, or anything of the like.

He knew more about secrets and lies and mistellings, now.

He had questions. Interrogatories that would never be answered because his family was stagnant and departed, long ago—gone in the stellar flare of the azure star, gone in the explosion, gone in the stillness of space. Gone, killed by the Arachnid's ship that had attacked them with no warning, from nowhere at all. A trap that had led to their death. To the death of everyone he had held dear. To a crew, to a *family*.

Tommy's shoes clicked against the floor as he lifted his palm and pressed it against the palm reader, turning apprehensively as he stood there waiting for the screen to light up in its iridescent green light. When it did, and the metal slid open with a slight hiss, Tommy came eye-to-eye with a small boy sitting on the top bunk.

He was short, with wavy chocolate-colored hair that dropped over his ears and partially over his eyes, harmonizing brownish eyes gawking at Tommy with hidden questions. Tommy quirked an eyebrow as the door slid shut behind him with a slight hiss—at least the entrance did not squeak as some did in the facility.

"You're sitting on my bunk," he deadpanned, and the boy jumped off with a small gasp, making space as Tommy sat down in the vacated area, surveying his new cellmate. He was thin enough, though Tommy was not obtuse enough to assume that that signaled inadequacy. He was short—far shorter than Tommy by a good hundred and fifty centimeters.

...okay, maybe that was exaggerating...but, to be fair, the kid was *very* short.

At least compared to him...and every other person to exist at his age. Reasonably, to some, he would have appeared slight, but to Tommy, whose entire tween growth had been about observing physiques to discern if they were going to attempt to kill him or not, he quickly marked the intelligence that slept behind the boy's eyes.

"H-hello," the boy said, a shudder in his voice that wasn't entirely real. Actually, it was extremely forced.

Tommy snorted as he turned over in his bunk to face the wall. "Cut the bullshit, man. I know you don't actually talk like that."

There was silence. "What?" the boy asked eventually.

Tommy rolled his eyes, though the brown-haired boy could not witness it from the position that he rested in. "Do you think I'm stupid?" He rolled over in the bed until he faced the other way, and,

consequently, the boy who stood there, dumbfounded. "Actually, don't answer that. Look, some people might fall for your doe-eyes and your bogus whiles, but I'm not an idiot. There's a reason that you're in prison."

The boy squinted at him. "There's a reason you are too," he pointed out, though that stupid forced stutter was gone.

"And yet I'm not trying to persuade you that I'm harmless," he defended.

"Are you?"

"What?" he asked, turning his chin to look at the brown-haired boy that perched on the bunk across from him with circumspect eyes, his orange jumpsuit rustling noisily.

"Harmless? Are you harmless?"

He grunted, glancing the boy up and down. Assuredly, this boy wasn't a Phantom—the telltale collar did not inhibit his neck. "You said it yourself. There's a reason I'm here too." He did not have the bit of tubing up his nose—not a Merling. No wings—that crossed Elytrian off the list. Possibly a Blazeborn? He wouldn't know until he viewed the boy drinking water or, if he were a Blazeborn, drink the red liquid akin to magma. Perhaps a Feline? He did not precisely have the cat-eye movements and the jumpiness that most Felines bore, nor the furry ears. An Enderian? Maybe some hybrid Enderian? No, he didn't have the dark skin...

Why did he care so much?

Perhaps because this boy reminded him of—

No. No, he could not think of *them*. They were free. Free from the grasps of the Arachnids, in a better place. *Free*.

"I'm Tubbo," the boy said eventually.

Tommy stared at him for a second.

Tubbo blinked at him. "You know it's rude not to introduce yourself back to me?" he said finally.

"I don't give a shit about stuff like that," he admitted, thinking of another place, another introduction. Another loss, another place of misery.

"Did your parents not teach you manners?"

"My parents are dead." As always, when he said those words, he remained calm and collected. Tubbo didn't know. It wasn't Tubbo's fault.

Tubbo swallowed, and immediate pity filled his brown eyes. Tommy scoffed and glanced away. "I'm- "

"Sorry?" he guessed. "It's not your fault. You didn't know. You didn't cause it. The Arachnids did. You were probably like—five when it happened. You're what—twelve?"

The boy quirked an eyebrow. "I'm seventeen," he said. Tommy fought to keep annoyance off his face. So what, the kid was older than him? It didn't matter. *Okay, maybe it did.* "How old are you?"

"Old enough," he grumbled.

"That's not an answer."

"I don't want to give you one," he snapped. "I don't care who you are or what you do, or how you ended up in this fucking cell. Just—stay on your side, and I'll stay on mine."

"That's not how this works—"

"It is now," he said in a near-snarl, turning over and closing his eyes. "Now, unless you want to end up with a pretty brown bruise to match your eyes, shut the fuck up."

Perhaps he was a bit harsh as Tubbo lapsed into silence. Tommy squeezed his eyes shut and weighed apologizing. But—apologizing would end with a conversation he did not want to continue, or even pursue. Apologizing would make Tubbo wish to talk to him. It would maybe even get him to reveal his name—it would start something he did not want to.

It would start another cycle, another person that he would have to forget about—or at least, try. It would start another bout of stupidity that—that *they* had always said he'd had.

Wariness remained ingrained in his bones, and he would not forget. Tubbo was here for a reason—Tommy did not think it was the same reason he was here. Tommy refused to open up to a boy just because he was his cellmate, just because he was a year older than him, perhaps less. Tommy would sooner die than be weakened by someone he barely knew.

And yet...the haunted eyes of the brown-haired boy named Tubbo lay ingrained in his mind as he drifted off to sleep on the hard metal and single, threadbare sheet of the cot.

He wondered if he had made the right choice.

"Found a pet, kid?"

Tommy turned, lunch tray in hand once more, to irritably see Corbin there—though, fortunately, with a bruised eye and a row of stitches in his jaw. "You look great."

Corbin snorted. "Who the fuck is he?" He pointed at someone behind Tommy, and he looked over his shoulder to see Tubbo staring at him, looking indeed like a lost puppy, a lunch tray in hand. He noted that it was a regular one—so clearly, the idiot boy wasn't an Avian or an Endarian who ate chorus fruit. Thank goodness he wasn't an Avian. Tommy hadn't thought he was one, though. He would have known if Tubbo had been, but it had been a while since he'd had contact with an Avian, so he'd shut himself away from that mess.

"My cellmate," he said finally.

"Finally got someone your own age?"

"Careful," he warned, putting up a hand and balancing his tray in the other. "Don't mess with him."

"Don't pretend you *care*, kid," Corbin snorted.

"I don't," Tommy said amicably, looking away as Tubbo started towards him. "Now fuck off. I'm only trying to help your face not get any fucking uglier, dickhead."

Corbin snarled at him, but wandered off to a different table—leaving Tommy alone, until Tubbo sat down beside him, fiddling with something that vanished into his sleeves the moment Tommy glanced at him.

"That guy seemed friendly," the smaller boy voiced after a moment.

"I punched him in the face yesterday," Tommy said. "For trying to steal my lunch."

"Nobody gets between you and food, huh?" Tubbo noted. "Are you a Feline?" Tubbo squinted at his head, trying to discern if he had ears hiding in his messy hair, but he wouldn't find anything. After all, Avians looked like Humans.

Tommy brushed off the question. "I don't give a fuck about food, Tubbo. I just want to show him who's the big man around here." *That's a lie, that's a fucking lie, all you fucking care about is fucking food—*

Shut the fuck up, he grumbled to himself.

"And—I suppose that's you, the big man?" It made sense that there was a hint of doubt in Tubbo's voice—Tommy was a tall, lanky boy with not many muscles to his name. He hid his mental scars behind a smile and a quick step.

"Indeed."

"Will—will they bother me?" Tubbo asked nervously. Again, Tubbo was reminded of—of someone else. *He's not here*, Tommy reminded himself. *He's gone. In a better place. Remember that.* He thought about Tubbo's words for a moment, scooping a bit of the greenery into his mouth and making a face at the lack of proper salad dressing. His aunt had made brilliant dressing, despite her not being an Avian. Tubbo played around with a piece of pork on his plate as he waited for an answer.

"Probably not," Tommy decided.

"But you said—"

"I said they bother me, and that's only 'cause they're dickheads," he snorted. "I think they're just jealous because I'm so cool." He smirked at Tubbo, who rolled his eyes.

"I've got to get out of here," the shorter boy muttered, glancing around once more.

"That's not gonna be easy," Tommy remarked. "There's been like—one escape in the entire time I was here. He was a Phantom."

"You mean Wilbur?"

Tommy shrugged, trying not to react at the familiarity that came upon him when he heard Tubbo speak. "I dunno the name," he lied. He'd been ten, and he *did* know Wilbur Soot's name—they'd last shared a cell. Wilbur had been seventeen at the time, and Tommy had hacked into the prison and input a coding set that he was sure still existed deep in the records. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to think of the consequences—that *planet*, those *people*—

"Oh, well, he escaped from here," Tubbo said good-naturedly, and Tommy was suddenly glad that he'd kept his name secret from the skinny brown-haired Phantom annoyance. "He refuses to talk much about it, though." Tubbo looked troubled. "I wish that he'd told me who helped him escape."

Tommy *really* didn't want this conversation to continue. He'd been short, then, and had dirty blonde hair—his hair had lightened with age, as Avians' did—he was sure that if Wilbur *had* described him, that Tubbo would still not recognize him.

He didn't want to mess with the Galactic Rebellion. He didn't want to deal with more Arachnids—honestly, the only reason he hadn't left this place was because he had nowhere to go. *Nowhere to run*. Nothing at all.

He didn't want this to happen again. Not after last time—not with the nightmares that he got, sometimes. Not with—with *him*, with *them*, and the screams that shattered his dreams.

His dad had taught him how to hack things like this—the code buried in the prison system allowed him to input a custom code that would unlock his cell. He did not know much, but he knew enough. Enough to leave. He had enough power to leave. It sometimes itched at the edges of his fingertips. Itched to get out, told him to *run* and not look back.

Perhaps he was just a coward, in the end. He did not want to leave—he did not want to face the world. He did not want to face his past. Besides, it wasn't like he could run. The prison was on a colossal rock circling around a solar system of gas giants.

It wasn't like he couldn't fly.

He'd always loved flying ships, especially small ones that he could fly through asteroid belts with. His dad had sent him through simulations once he had shown interest. Sometimes he dreamt of flying through the stars, searching for the same place that his family had before the explosion that had wrecked his entire life. Sometimes he dreamed of warships and explosions on that damned red planet. Sometimes he dreamed of laughter and light and love.

Sometimes he remembered his aunt stuffing him into the escape pod; he remembered his screams as she placed a hand upon the glass, their fingers centimeters away—close but not touching.

Never touching again.

He remembered her pressing the eject button, and he remembered her face as she turned to go rush to the bridge to his father. He remembered the escape pods of the Hoglins and Piglins they'd been transporting—yet somehow, he was the only one in prison. He remembered the crew's deaths as the 'rescue' ship came by, and they died, one by one. He remembered his escape pod failing as the explosion came on and watching as the Piglins and Hoglins made it to the planet below, and he was left to float in space among the wreckage of his ship.

Ten years old. He'd feigned innocence, the single line of code that his dad had whispered into his ear and the line of code that his aunt finished—completing *something*—running through his mind as the Arachnids questioned him. He remembered living and others dying.

"Why are you here, Tubbo?" he found himself asking.

The boy looked at him, brown eyes and freckled face—too young, he thought. Too young for anything but—

"I'm part of the Galactic Rebellion," Tubbo murmured.

Surprise flared in Tommy before he snorted. "They recruit so young?" he asked scathingly.

"What do you have against them?"

"My parents worked for them," he muttered—because it was true. They'd never *told* him, but he wasn't stupid. He'd put the clues together quickly. They were a 'transportation' crew, but they'd had messages that they dropped off in shady places and guns on their ship that other transport ships didn't have.

"Really?"

"They're dead," he spat again. Tubbo recoiled, face twisting as he remembered that they'd exchanged these words before.

"I'm—sorry," the boy said again, just as he had last time. And he probably would again, like—

"It was a long time ago."

He didn't know why he was telling Tubbo this. He'd known the boy for all of twelve hours—and yet, he saw a bit of himself in the other boy. He saw a bit of himself, and he saw a bit of—of other people, from his childhood. Or, at least, the counterfeit one he'd thought he'd had.

"Do you want to escape with me?"

"What?" he said, a lettuce bit falling out of his mouth as he swung his head to stare at the boy in surprise.

"Do you want to escape with me?" Tubbo repeated, biting into his apple with a noisy crunch.

"I..." Tommy trailed off. "Why are you asking me this? Don't you have a mission?"

Tubbo blinked at him. "You weren't supposed to know that."

"I'm not stupid."

"No, I don't suppose you are," the brown-haired boy said thoughtfully. "Wilbur was here accidentally. I'm here on purpose. There's a rumor swirling around the inner ranks of the Arachnids that one of our spies uncovered about someone that knows the location of the Artifact."

"I don't know what that is, and I don't fucking care," Tommy said. "But if you're looking for members of the Galactic Rebellion, they're all dead. Tortured to death—or worse." He snorted. "They never last long here."

"You did."

"I'm not a member of the Galactic Rebellion," he pointed out, grabbing Tubbo's apple and biting it. He did not discount that he hadn't been tortured because that would be lying. The other boy rolled his eyes, but didn't move to grab it back. Tommy counted that as a win. "You shouldn't even be telling me about your mission."

"I've always made a terrible spy," Tubbo said with a shrug.

Tommy leveled him with a look. "Good way to get yourself killed."

"I'm pretty good at that."

You're pretty good at that, Tommy.

Tommy slammed his hand down on the table, glad that nobody was near enough to hear their words, or read the thoughts that briefed his mind from long ago. He knew that some species could do that, but the Arachnids had never gotten one to comply. "Look—Tubbo, or whatever—what are you doing? You're part of the Rebellion—I could have guessed that, by the way—and you don't even know my fucking *name*."

Tubbo stared at him for a second and then pulled a datapad from absolutely *nowhere*. Tommy's jaw dropped, and Tubbo tapped through it, fingers flying and bringing up lines of code faster than he could ever hope to see. Tommy saw a guard eye them out of the corner of his eye and start to approach them, his buzz baton raised.

The datapad vanished once the guard got into viewing range, replaced for a piece of obscure metal that closely resembled the datapad—Tommy doesn't know where he got *that*, either. Tubbo had a look of nonchalance on his face—as if he hadn't just broken every rule in the entire facility.

"Prisoner T-391, I'm going to need that," the guard apprised, and Tubbo rolled his eyes before handing over the piece of dark metal. The guard examined it for a second before handing it back.

"It's just a piece of metal, sir," Tubbo said innocently. "From the mining faculty back home. Reminds me of my dad. He's probably waiting for me." Tommy gaped at the lie that Tubbo had

so *easily* brought up. Why had Tubbo failed to lie to him?

The guard sneered at them before returning to his post.

Tubbo's innocent look turned quickly into a flash of disdain before that, too, was hidden behind his usual expression.

"The fuck was *that*?" Tommy demanded.

"That, *Tommy*, was the reason that I'm part of the rebellion," Tubbo said neutrally, and Tommy's eyes widened at his name. "You never told them your last name?"

"I don't know it," he lied.

"Ah," Tubbo said. He didn't look like he believed him, but Tommy didn't care because his identity was sound...for the most part.

"What was *that*?" he asked again.

"I'm a Shulker," Tubbo said. "There's a fourth-dimensional space I can pull things from. It's another reason I was sent here. It's easy to escape."

A...Shulker?

"Those don't exist anymore," Tommy said. The Arachnids had said that. They were like collectors, and he was the main attraction.

"Well, I'm one, so they clearly do," Tubbo said, sounding affronted.

"You just have—" Tommy gestured randomly. "—a secret dimensional space that you can pull things out of."

"Yes," Tubbo said. "I hacked into the system and found your name." He paused. "Nice bit of code, by the way. For the door."

He started. "You *saw* that?"

Tubbo snorted. "Yes, I saw that. It stuck out like a sore thumb. Dream would be disappointed in you." Tommy didn't bother to ask who Dream was—probably another one of Tubbo's ship members. "And before you ask how I knew it was you—it has the coding *"Big Man Tommy Was Here"* on it."

Tommy smiled sheepishly. "Yes, I suppose that makes sense."

Tubbo's eyes softened. "I'm not in the rebellion because I paid my way in, Tommy," he murmured. "Nor because I'm a Shulker. I have my skills, and though my crew didn't enjoy—read: had many, many arguments—about sending me into this precarious position, the way I'm able to manipulate people with a few words makes things easier. Grown adults have a harder time acting innocent."

Tommy admitted that perhaps he'd underestimated Tubbo.

Chapter End Notes

and so it begins.

(also yes, I'm back. And no, this isn't 100% me. This was written with the lovely help of my girlfriend, who does not have an Ao3 account.)

No, Tubbo, he was my father

*Freedom, in any case,
is only possible by
constantly struggling for it.*

- Albert Einstein

"I'm the Chief Operations Officer of the *L'manburg*," Tubbo explained later when they'd been forced back into their cells.

"They'll hear you," Tommy hissed, afraid their cover had already been blown. A cold sweat began to leak from his skin—what if *he* was still alive? What if *he* was here, anticipating the tinniest slip-up, and the opportunity had just manifested itself—

"I carry a jammer with me at all times," Tubbo said breezily, interrupting Tommy's languid stream of thoughts—thankfully, as they'd been getting out of hand. When had he fallen so far as to slip up to *that* degree? "We're free to talk without a chance of someone overhearing us." He smiled kindly. "You said your parents were part of the Galactic Rebellion, yeah?"

"Parent," Tommy admonished absentmindedly. "I never knew my mother." *Much*. "My dad taught me a bit about hacking—hence the door—and we traveled with my aunt."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Tubbo said. "Do you know who they were to us?"

"They never told me they were a part of the rebellion," Tommy explained. "But—I knew. Later on, once I had some time to think about it." He snorted. "And I had a long time to think about it."

"You've been here since you were ten."

Tommy glanced up at him, mouth opening in a question—and then snapped it shut when he recognized that Tubbo had the datapad back out. "Yes. I'm sixteen now." He flushed at Tubbo's raised eyebrow. "Nearly seventeen." Tubbo didn't have to know that he had been—elsewhere. For good portions of his time captured. Tubbo saw his first entry date—*Stardate 92340.81*—to the current date—*Stardate 98859.56*. And that was what was necessary and all Tubbo needed to know.

He was suddenly glad of the thoroughness *he* had gone through to make sure Tommy would not be missed. Tubbo would not know what he had been part of. What he had survived, and how far he had fallen.

"That matches up to—" Tubbo cut himself off. "Classified information."

"Wow, and your mission isn't one of them?" he remarked sarcastically, pushing his dark thoughts out of his head and back into convening with his fellow teenager. It made things more manageable.

"Not like...that," Tubbo said. He sighed. "It's complicated."

"What are you even here for, Tubbo?" Tommy asked.

"Knowledge," the boy said. "As I said, we're trying to find information on the Artifact." He seemed slightly uncomfortable, as if he'd already revealed too much. Which he had. Even Tommy knew that much.

"You mean the Artifact the Rebellion stole?" Tommy asked, raising an eyebrow and thinking of individual conversations that had taken place throughout the course of his life—some of which remained ingrained in his head in his nightmares.

"We didn't *steal* anything," Tubbo snapped. "They're accusing us of stealing the Artifact, but we *didn't* and—" he sighed. "Sorry. I forgot you've been here for a while and only know the word of the Arachnids." Tommy clamped his lips shut and tried not to breathe too hard.

"So...why are you trying to find it?" he asked hesitantly, after a second of regaining himself, and clasping his hands behind his head on the cot, staring at the tiled ceiling.

"So we can end this galactic war," Tubbo said. "Most of us are sick and tired of it. We've lost too many family members, too many friends." His mouth scrunched into a thin line. "I lost my parents two years ago."

"I'm...sorry," Tommy said. And...he is. He surprised himself when he said that—well, not when he *said* it, but when he realized he meant it.

"It's fine," Tubbo said with a sad smile. "They weren't excellent parents anyway. I—miss them anyway. I miss them for my sister." He smiled again, more to himself than any occupants of the room. "They loved her, even if they didn't love me. She's training to be a medical officer," he added, almost in afterthought.

"Sounds interesting," Tommy lied.

Tubbo laughed. "It's not," he said. "But both mother and father were ones, and well—when I chose to pursue operations, especially when I got on the *L'manburg*—they weren't happy."

"Jealous?" Tommy asked, thinking of his own ship. He had only known the two of them, mostly—others switched on and off, but it had been his home for ten years.

"It's considered one of the best in the Galactic Rebellion," Tubbo said with a wry smile. "I got Chief position a few months back, but I've been on the ship since I was fourteen. As I said, they weren't happy that I was actually *good* at something other than medicine."

"Your sister," Tommy said. "What's her name?"

"Lani," Tubbo said with a sigh. "She's training under Lieutenant Doctor Niki now," he added. "On the *L'manburg* as well. It's—scary, having the last member of your family there, especially when we do dangerous missions, but I think I'd rather know where she is than leave her on a planet and have that planet be invaded while I'm gone."

Tommy thought back to his own ship—the one that his father and aunt had flown before they'd gotten blown up.

The *H.M.S Fran*, he remembered blearily.

It had been home. For ten years, it had been his home, and then it had been blown up in front of his eyes, and he had been forced to watch the metal drift around him, devoid of life itself.

"Tommy?"

He turned his head to look at—his friend?—was Tubbo his friend, now? He supposed so. "Yeah?"

"Are you sure that nobody's survived here for over five years?"

He nodded. "I'm the oldest—well, actually, I'm the *youngest*, but I'm the veteran here." He smiled sadly. "I'm sorry, Tubbo. You won't be finding any information. They probably died long ago."

Tubbo sighed. "Well, it was worth a shot," he muttered. "Now I gotta get out of here."

"How do you plan on doing that?" Tommy asked, interested—for once.

"The hanger," Tubbo said simply.

"That's suicide." This whole thing was suicide.

"It's not," Tubbo said. "Not when you know what you're doing."

"Do you? Know what you're doing, I mean?"

Tubbo hesitated. "Well, no—"

Tommy snorted. "Of course not," he muttered. "Do you even know how to fly an Arachnid fighter?"

"No—"

"I do," he interrupted. Squeezed his eyes shut and prayed that Tubbo did not ask *why* he knew or *how* he knew. He would not answer, and then suspicion would logically follow.

Tubbo paused. Looked at him for a second. "Do you...want to get out of here, Tommy?" he asked carefully.

Tommy felt a grin appear on his face—half because Tubbo did not ask and half because there was so much of him that leaped to that question that screamed at him *yes*. "Gladly," he said—and for the first time in his life, he *did*. He wouldn't go with the Rebellion, but maybe they would pay him something for helping free one of their...child spies. Perhaps he would get enough to start a new life, away from all this mess—on a green planet with plenty of food for his dying species. *He* wouldn't have to know that Tommy was gone.

Perhaps he would see...them again.

"Great," Tubbo said, pulling out his datapad and tapping in a few things. "The *L'manburg* should be here soon." He cocked his head as a line of text that Tommy couldn't read appeared and then flicked his wrist, the datapad disappearing back into his fourth-dimensional space.

"That easy?" Tommy gaped.

Tubbo grinned at him. "We're the best of the best, Tommy."

"Who's your helmsman?" he found himself asking. It had been his aunt's position, and he had often listened—patiently, for once—as she'd explained how to fly a ship while his father sat in the captains' chair, watching with prideful eyes.

Tubbo's grin faded. "How do you know that word?"

"My—" he paused. "The helmsman on the *H.M.S Fran* taught me some things."

"The *H.M.S Fran*?" Tubbo said, his jaw-dropping. "Your family served on that ship?"

Tommy winced. "Um...yeah," he said finally, neglecting to mention that his aunt had been the helms..woman and his father the captain—and before she had died, his mother, the Chief Medical Officer. "Why? Do you know it?"

"Tommy, that ship is a *legend*," Tubbo gasped. "They did hundreds of missions for fourteen years without being caught."

"Believe me, they were caught," Tommy said dryly. "And killed. Every single one of them." *Some of them worse than others.*

Tubbo's expression softened. "I am sorry, Tommy," he said again. "I would have liked to meet Captain Sam, I think. He was apparently a brilliant leader and an even better mechanic." Tommy inhaled sharply at the mention of his father's name, and Tubbo's sharp eyes noted that. "You knew him?"

"You could say that," he replied weakly.

"And his co-captain, Captain Cara Puffy—she was the pilot, and it was said she could steer the *H.M.S Fran* through any asteroid field and have the ship escape any battlefield," Tubbo said wistfully.

It was odd, hearing them as legends and not as the people Tommy knew them as. It was odd to hear him talk about *Puffy*—his aunt—and Sam—his father. They were just merely...people, to him.

Also, apparently, they were legends.

"I can't believe that you served on the *H.M.S Fran*!" Tubbo gushed. "Techno will love to hear about this!"

"Who the fuck is Techno?" Tommy asked. "Also, I didn't serve on it. I was a child, Tubbo. I just followed my dad and aunt around and tried to learn some shit."

"Techno's the First Officer," Tubbo said. "He *loves* history." Tommy got that feeling that wasn't the only reason, but...Tubbo's eyes sharpened on Tommy. "You don't suppose you know anything about the *H.M.S Fran*, do you? That's where all the Avians were, and they had important information on scrolls that weren't delivered to Command."

"Tubbo, that ship blew up in front of my eyes," Tommy said. "There's nothing left. And even if there were, the Arachnids would have it."

"You're probably right," Tubbo sighed. "Pity you were the only survivor of the crew." Tommy stiffened, and Tubbo's head shot up so fast that the audible crack of his head from the tension was heard loudly throughout the room. "I am...sorry. I did not mean it like that."

"Yeah, well, you said it," Tommy muttered bitterly. "Look, I *get* it, I do. Anybody would rather have someone else besides me survive the crash. My family, a random crew member—I *get* it, everyone was a better choice than some stupid ten-year-old."

"That's not what I meant," Tubbo said gently. "I would rather take you over some stuck-up old guy."

"Even if he had the necessary information?"

Tubbo tilted his head, thinking. "That is a matter between my preferences and my duty as a rebellion member—yet you are here, at this moment, and so I prefer you."

"Thanks," Tommy muttered.

"You mistook my words," Tubbo said momentarily. "You were not the only survivor. Merely the only surviving crew members. Plenty of Piglins and Hoglins were able to get away."

Tommy tried to remember the Piglin creatures and their pale pink-tan skin, their white tusks and beady eyes—not to mention their love for gold. The Hoglins were a different story; more diminutive sentient creatures and far more animalistic—but he had been forbidden to spend time near them, and after a glimpse at their long snouts and sharp yellow teeth, he had followed his aunt's wishes.

"Remember Techno?" Tubbo prompted him. Tommy nodded wordlessly. "Right, he's a Piglin hybrid. Half Piglin and half Feline." While interesting, Tommy wondered what that had to do with the current situation. "He's one of the survivors from the *H.M.S Fran*. He talks about it sometimes."

"I don't remember him."

"You wouldn't have," Tubbo said. "He never mentioned a ten-year child among them, anyway. He said that ninety-five percent of the escape pods did not make it to the planet below, and of the seven that did, they were full of Piglins and Hoglins."

"Right," Tommy said stiffly. "And the Arachnids killed everyone else."

"What happened to the ship, Tommy?"

"What?" he asked, faking innocence, the question bringing up a part of him he did not want to remember.

"The rebellion arrived there five days later and found only scrap metal and...bodies," Tubbo said. "They rescued the survivors from the planet below, but there was no ship—or not much of it, anyway."

"It blew up," he said, gnashing his teeth together to keep from straining his jaw.

"I do not think you are telling the truth."

"Fuck off," he said. Tubbo raised an eyebrow at him. "They didn't *take* the ship or the information. My—the captains thought it best to destroy it."

"How?" Tubbo asked, fascinated.

Tommy swallowed. "By driving it straight at the Arachnids' ship," he said, closing his eyes and trying not to remember staring out the porthole in his escape pod—bearing a perfect view for the sleek white ship that went straight into the spider's jaw. The explosion that followed, while considerable, had horrified him as he pictured his aunt and father, the only two onboard, holding hands before the end.

Part of him wished that sometimes he had been on board as well—just so the pain in him would not remain. So that he would not have to remember the idiocy of the situation—that situation, they had not wanted to give up the rebellion information, and so they had destroyed it.

From a logical perspective, it made sense. From a logical perspective, the Rebellion—and Tommy's family—would not have wanted the Arachnids to gain information—information that Tommy did not know except for the long string of code in his head.

From a selfish perspective, it was stupid. From a selfish perspective, from a child's perspective, and from his perspective, he wanted his family back; Rebellion be damned to hell. From a selfish perspective, he hated his family for what their abandonment had done to *him*. For what had happened to *him*. It was not logical—but then again, Tommy was rarely a logical person.

"I take it that you were not in the same escape pod as your family?"

Tommy shook his head numbly. "They stayed back on the ship."

"I thought Captain Sam and Captain Puffy would have wanted to do that alone. I am also assuming that autopilot was broken."

"You are correct in your assumptions," he said robotically, trying not to cry. "I was in the final escape pod, and they were not."

"How selfish of them," Tubbo observed. Anger flashed in his eyes. "The ship already had a suitable amount of crew members to...attain the end that the captains wished, so why did they not come with you?"

Tommy closed his eyes, leaning back against the cold wall. His throat was sick, as if there was a lump that he couldn't reach. He hadn't talked about this—ever, really, and now he was sitting down with a boy he had only known for a few hours—had it been a day yet?—and talking about a tragedy that had been a legend. "Tubbo—"

"They left a *kid* to be on his own," Tubbo said, enraged and furious. "To be—well, captured by Arachnids! The least they could have done is been here with you, so you weren't fucking *alone*."

"Tubbo—"

"—It just doesn't make any sense—"

"TUBBO!" Tommy realized he was breathing hard as his shout rang out in the now quiet room. "Tubbo, Sam was my dad. Puffy was my aunt."

"Oh," Tubbo said.

He didn't have time to say more, because all hell broke loose.

It turned out, Tommy had lost his touch with flying. And by lost his touch, that meant that while getting chased by nearly four-dozen Arachnid fighters, he was just barely able to get away.

He would have called Tommy pitiful. Sam would have stood there with a smile and encouraged Tommy to try again at the simulation.

Of course, this wasn't a simulation. This was real life. And Tommy had just flown out of the landing zone and into the asteroid belt that the prison was part of—after all, it was just a bit of technological-heavy metal carved into a giant rock.

A giant rock that was heavily protected and had about a quadrillion fighters in it.

Tommy gritted his teeth and turned the controls, driving the small two-seater fighter behind an asteroid, dodging a line of golden spacecraft fire. "Dammit," he muttered.

"Shields at twenty percent," Tubbo warned him, pressing down firmly and twisting the gun to fire back at their followers. "We must get to the *L'manburg*."

"I don't *see* your fucking ship anywhere!" Tommy roared, doing a point roll to dodge another line of fire. "If we leave this asteroid belt, we will *die*!"

» *Prisoners T-869 and T-391, please relinquish control of your vessel and surrender peacefully to the Arachnids.* «

"OH, FUCK OFF!" Tommy shouted, slamming his hand down on the communications board, doing an inside snap roll to dodge a squadron of Arachnid fighters that had appeared out of nowhere.

"I do not think Bad would have approved of that," Tubbo murmured.

"Less talking, more firing!" he snapped, holding his breath and moving into a four-point roll, a maneuver that he had been shown only once.

Tubbo gasped as the world spun before righting itself, and Tommy fumbled with the semi-unfamiliar controls of the Arachnid fighters. "How many times have you flown a craft like this?" he demanded, fingers resuming their motions on the triggers as the world spun past, stars swirling into pale lines as they zoomed over and under the asteroid belt.

Tommy was temporarily mesmerized by the beauty of space—he always had been, as he only got to see it bi-monthly—and every time, it took his breath away.

"Less staring, more flying!" Tubbo snapped, mimicking his voice. Tommy snorted and dodged into an Immelmann maneuver.

"We're going to die if your stupid spacecraft isn't here in about twenty seconds," he retorted.

Tubbo glared at him, but didn't respond as he fired more lasers out of their gunship—missing most of the time, but the occasional bouts of joy were heard in Tommy's ears as he concentrated on *not* letting them die.

"The fighters are not operating at the max capacity," Tubbo announced.

"I'm *well aware*; otherwise, we would be dead," he said, going into a reverse-half Cuban eight. *That* procedure had required some practice—though not in person, in a simulated environment. He barely accomplished it, just scraping the tip of an asteroid as he pulled up, dizziness swinging through him like the waves in the holomovies.

"How many times have you flown a real fighter, again?" Tubbo squeaked.

"None," he replied grimly. None in space, anyway. He'd flown an Arachnid fighter before, just...in an area with gravity. Over the golden fields of a red planet.

"*NONE* —"

A disturbance shut the other boy up, and Tommy looked up to see a giant silver ship appear just outside the other end of the asteroid belt. He approximated a few trillion meters, gritted his teeth, and dove into open space.

By now, about two dozen fighters were circling them, and Tommy swallowed when he saw an Arachnid warship warp into the space behind them.

"FUCKING CONTACT THEM!" he shouted, noting the *L'manburg* written on the side of the silver vessel in giant blocky letters. The rest was a blur as he dove into a bell tailslide to avoid just about a million lasers that were *now* shooting to kill.

Well, shit.

Tubbo stopped firing, making the split-second decision that guns would no longer be helpful in this situation. He was right. Tommy yelped as they were hit—barely, just barely—a small chunk of smoking metal lost in the space behind him as he punched the gas—an old metaphorical term, as the Arachnid's ships ran on ischyen—and aimed for Tubbo's stupid ship.

Why the fuck had he gotten himself involved in this mess?

Why did he think escaping was a good idea?

It was an excellent way to get himself *captured* and back—

"AN-Craft-2876 to *L'manburg*, do you copy?" Tubbo's voice said, somehow maintaining his calm. "I repeat, *do you copy?*"

A second of silence. Tommy cursed up and down, a few choice ones that his dad and aunt surely would never have approved of and a few ones that he'd learned from the prisoners and a red planet covered in the brown grass.

› AN-Craft-2878, we are receiving your hail. State your intentions. ‹

"FUCKING FINALLY!" Tommy yelled, banishing his leaking thoughts from his mind. He swore he heard someone snicker on the other end before Tubbo resumed talking. The woman speaking had a strange accent that he couldn't exactly pinpoint. Some form of Terran, maybe?

"Minx, this is—this is Underscore," Tubbo said, and Tommy raised his eyebrows at the clear code name. "Can you page me through to Wilbur?"

› *Tubbo?* ‹

"Nice job keeping my name out of your mouth," Tubbo grimaced.

› *Holy fookin' shite, I've never been so fookin' glad to hear your fookin' voice in my whole life!* ‹

"I appreciate the sentiment, but I need communication access to the bridge, *now*," Tubbo snapped, and Tommy wheeled into an Aileron roll. The other boy on the craft gasped softly as Tommy dodged behind an asteroid, swearing as he noted the smoking engine.

Not good, not good—

› *AN-Craft-2878, this is the L'manburg bridge you are currently broadcasting to.* ‹

Ah. Tommy swallowed as he recognized that voice. It had been six years ago—but he would have recognized that Terran accent anywhere. That was Wilbur.

"WILBUR!" Tubbo shouted, gasping again as Tommy slammed into a halt and changed his descent into what could only be the way downwards—except there wasn't a direction called down in space. "DO YOU SEE THE FIGHTER CRAFT?"

› *TUBBO?* ‹

Tommy heard the shouting of background noise behind Wilbur Soot but maintained his silence as he concentrated on not dying.

"DO YOU SEE THE CRAFT?"

A moment of silence.

› *Harvey has eyes on a small craft that is being tracked by twenty-three Arachnid ships and a battleship.* ‹

Wilbur was impressively calm as he took in the scenario that they were currently in, Tommy noted.

"THAT'S US!" Tubbo wailed. Wilbur was less calm.

› *How the fuck are you alive? That's some damned fancy moves —* ‹

"THAT DOESN'T MATTER; GET US OUT OF HERE!" Tubbo screamed, bringing his knees to his chest as Tommy clicked a few more buttons, trying to increase their speed. "Can you beam us

out?"

› *Fundy says that we cannot do so, as your craft is moving too unpredictably and at too fast of a rate for him to lock control of it.* ‹

"Then tell me where to fucking fly!"

› *Dream is moving us into position. Can you make it fourteen kilometers at your seven-o'clock?*
‹

Tommy glanced behind him, gritting his teeth, as Tubbo stared at him with wide brown eyes. He nodded once—it would be close, but he would be damned if he didn't try.

"Yes," Tubbo said, voice more confident than it had been before.

› *We await your arrival.* ‹

Tommy snorted.

"See you there," Tubbo managed.

› *Good luck.* ‹

So Apparently I'm Addicted To Drugs

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Every parting is a form of death,
as every reunion is a type of heaven.*

- Tyron Edwards

"I don't believe in luck," Tommy snarled as he shifted into tenth gear and gave the ship everything it got, hairline cracks appearing on the glass. Tubbo muttered something, perhaps a prayer, but Tommy turned the ship sharply left and narrowed his eyes on the *L'manburg*, noting the hold that was opening up and the engines powered to run as the space battle raged on around him. "Shit, fuck, shit, *power up*, you fucking *dickhead*—"

They slammed into the hold, the ship crashing to the ground as gravity engaged around them, and Tommy watched hysterically as a forcefield appeared between them and open space—and then, and then *warp*, and the stars zoomed past, mere lines of light.

Tommy kicked his legs up and pushed at the glass, shattering it as he jumped out, scrunching his face at the smoking wreck that lay on the pristine floor of the *L'manburg's* dock. "Fuck that shit," he muttered, helping Tubbo out, both boys covered in soot—one shaking more than the other.

He swore up and down that it wasn't him.

"Oh my God, we're alive," Tubbo said ecstatically, tears of—hilarity?—running down his face. "OH MY GOD, WE'RE ALIVE!"

The doors burst open, and Tommy spun to see two figures burst through it. He jumped as the ship sparked, dragging himself and Tubbo away from it as two women—one fully grown, one a young

girl shorter than Tubbo himself—rushed towards them, dressed in scrubs. He surveyed them as they approached. One had bright pink hair—the older—tied back in a small ponytail, and the other—the younger—long brown hair done up in a braid.

"TUBBO!" the little one screeched.

"Lani," Tubbo murmured, face pale as he nearly collapsed into the grip of his—younger sister?

The other one surveyed him, narrowing her eyes as she glanced between him and the wreck, hands moving towards the phaser at her side. She had a small tube up her nose, leading down to a device strapped to her waist—ah, a Merling. He held his hands up to show he meant no harm. "You should take him to your medbay," he said soothingly. "He was stabbed."

"Oh my *God*," Lani said, hand coming away with blood as Tubbo finally, *finally*, fainted.

"Weapon?" the other one briskly asked as she picked up Tubbo's feet and herded them back through the door.

"Knife," he answered. "No poison, pure iron. Just blood loss."

"That's a relief," the woman said, touching something next to her ear. "Sapnap, we have an unexpected visitor. Can you come down here with some personal?" She paused, clearly waiting for a response. "Nah," she said after a moment. "He was in the spaceship with Tubbo. I need to deal with an injury, so if you would escort him to the bridge...?"

"What's going to happen to me?" he asked curiously, scrubbing the hair out of his eyes once the woman got her answer and took her hand off her commlink.

"You're going to see the captain," she said. "Seeing as he's unconscious." She nodded with her chin at the pale boy that she and Lani were carrying. "He will be fine, after an IV and a bit of rest," she reassured him.

He swallowed. "Very well."

Approximately two minutes and fifteen seconds later, a man wearing white and black came jogging down the hallway, a phaser in one hand. He had pitch-black hair and dark brown eyes—not chocolate like Tubbo's, closer to coffee—and a headband keeping his hair back from his eyes. "Niki," he said evenly and then turned to Tommy. "I'm supposed to escort you to the brig?"

The pink-haired woman—Niki—rolled her eyes sharply. "To the *bridge*, Sapnap," she said, pinching her nose and leaving a bloodstain there. Sapnap stared at it in surprise, glancing down with noticeable concern at Tubbo. "He is fine," she assured him. "Just blood loss. I will take him to the medbay—but I have no doubt that Phil wants to speak to..." she trailed off, offering Tommy the chance to reveal his name.

He did not. "Great, and then can I go?"

"No—" Sapnap said.

"It remains to be seen," Niki interrupted, glaring at the taller man. "Now, hurry up. I have a patient to see."

Sapnap reached for Tommy's shoulder, and he dodged away, grimacing. "I would prefer if you did not touch me." Lani glanced his way as they disappeared around the corner. He had to remind himself that that was Tubbo's sister, and his *friend* would be fine. They were not trying to kill Tubbo.

"C'mon, dude, let's go," Sapnap snorted, leading him over to what seemed to be an elevator, though far quieter and sleeker. Tommy made sure to note the code he inputted—while at the same time, maintaining his distance from the military personal and pretending to glance away.

7834.

"So...am I arrested?" he asked, as the elevator began its ascent up, white lights blinking at him from behind the glass.

"No."

"Can I leave?"

"No."

"So I *am* arrested. Under what charges?"

Sapnap opened his mouth—and then snapped it shut. "Thievery?" he tried.

"You are right on that," Tommy grinned, tossing the man the clearance badge that he'd pickpocketed.

"Hey—!"

The door slid open, and a very familiar sight met Tommy. After all, most rebellion ships were identical—the *H.M.S. Fran* and the *L'manburg* were clearly no different.

Five people sat in various chairs around the area. Two in the front, near the window, one at the center—the captain's chair—and two to either side, the Chief Communications Officer and the Chief Operations Officer, separately. One was empty—the C.T.O, Tommy noted.

In the captain's chair sat an Elytrian with crow-black wings, looking at Tommy through glaringly blue eyes and blonde hair, a stupid-looking bucket hat on his head. The Navigations chair—the helmsman—held a blonde-haired man wearing an equally stupid white mask with a smiley face on it, though it was pushed to the side to reveal green eyes and a freckled face. He could only be the one that Wilbur had referred to as *Dream*, as Wilbur had mentioned something about navigating over the comms. To Dream's left sat a man with half-orange, half-green hair and the same stupid red shirt that had a customized face on it. Tommy racked his brain for the position—ah, the Chief Operations Officer. So this guy must be Tubbo's stand-in.

The Communications area could only be Wilbur, as Tommy recognized him nearly instantly, from the scruffy brown hair and the lopsided grin to the stupid position that he sat in.

The one that sat in the First Officer chair was a Piglin. Or at least—half-piglin and Tommy quickly identified him as Techno, for there wasn't another fucking pig thing in the room that Tubbo had talked about.

"Welcome to the bridge," Sapnap said loudly.

"Thanks," he muttered sarcastically.

"Wait a second, I thought Tubbo was here," the Operations Officer said, a touch wistfully.

"He's in the medbay," he informed the half-orange-half-green guy before the others could speak up. "Got stabbed and shit."

"Who the fuck are *you*?" idiot-mask-guy, also known as Dream, asked.

"Nobody," he said. "Who are *you*?"

"I'm—"

"Actually, I don't care," he interrupted, his smile curling into a slight smirk as Dream hissed in annoyance.

"Kid, can you just tell us what you're doing on the ship?" the man in the chair asked calmly.

"For your information, I was in prison," Tommy said sagely. "And Tubbo offered up a rescue. So I took it. After the gravity was removed, we sort of...swam to the ship dock, and I stole an Arachnid craft. Which you saw. Me flying. Of course. I think it was pretty cool."

Techno whistled. "Damn, kid, you know how to fly. Who taught you?"

"I've only flown thrice," he said, brushing the end of the question off. Six mouths dropped. He counted them, one by one, a wicked grin on his face. "Technically. I've done simulations, though." He neglected to mention who had taken him flying because he did not want to think about that.

"You've only flown a fighter three times, and then you—" Dream started.

"Executed a pretty steller Pugachev's Cobra into a Lomcovak and then shifted tolerably into an inside loop?" he finished seriously.

"Well, yeah," Dream said lamely, surprise flashing across his face as he adjusted his mask.

"I'm pretty cool."

"And pretty arrogant," Mr. Pretty Face muttered.

"Shut the fuck up, Wilbur," he said, without thinking.

The bridge was silent. "How do you know my name?" Wilbur asked after a moment. He did not recognize him. Tommy hid his shaking hands behind his back, suddenly glad of his biology. Suddenly glad that as a youth he had borne dirty blonde hair and his eyes had been far brighter before the youth had been beaten out of him.

"Would you believe me if I said that Tubbo told me?"

"Unfortunately," Wilbur responded, and Tommy let out a small breath of relief. "Kid has a habit of spilling everything. Even though he can lie well, it doesn't make any sense."

Tommy took a moment to survey the holograms, noting the dancing lines—some of which he recognized and others that he did not. "So...why exactly am I here?"

"Well, kid, we want to know who you are," the captain said.

"Who are *you*?" he retorted, quite rudely.

"I'm Philza," the captain said. "You already know Wilbur, our communications chief, and this is Techno, my first officer." Techno raised an eyebrow at the introduction. "Dream, our helmsman—" So he *had* correctly identified the idiotic navigator. "—and Harvey, who is currently stepping in for Tubbo as our Chief Operations Officer."

"Brilliant," he said sarcastically.

"So, kid, what's *your* deal?" Techno asked bluntly.

"Don't call me kid."

"Unless you give me something else to call you—"

"Tommy," he interrupted, a pit forming in his stomach at the ease that he had given them his name. It was fine. They were Tubbo's friends. He could trust them. Enough to give them his nickname, anyway.

"Okay. Tommy," Philza said. "Who are you?"

He grinned weakly, shifting uncomfortably under the stares. "Would you believe me if I said I was in prison for thievery?" Sapnap rolled his eyes at the small inside joke they shared.

"Kid—" Tommy glared at Techno. "—Tommy, that's a high-security prison for Origins. Not even Humans can get in there. Petty thievery ain't gonna get you anywhere." Tommy was suddenly glad that the other prisoners didn't know that Humans couldn't be kept in that prison. That would have made things a *lot* more complicated.

"Not unless you stole a spaceship," he pointed out.

"You didn't steal a spaceship," Dream snorted.

"How the fuck do *you* know what I did and didn't do?" he asked defensively.

"Because you said you've never circumnavigated before, save for three times, and I'm inclined to believe that sentence more than this one." Tommy rolled his eyes at Dream's conclusion. "What's the real reason you're in prison?"

"Does it matter?" he asked. "I plan on leaving for the nearest planet."

"You *did* help Tubbo escape," Harvey pointed out when Dream opened his mouth to argue. "We could at least take you home to your parents."

Tommy couldn't exactly tell them that his home had been the *H.M.S Fran*, which was little more than scrap metal floating somewhere in space. That would lead to questions and dealings he didn't *want*, especially with the Galactic Rebellion.

These guys looked more organized than a simple rebellion. More than *his* Galactic Rebellion, anyhow.

"My parents are dead," he said instead. "And before you give me your pitiful stares—they've been dead for over six years." Nearly seven, now.

"How old are you?"

"Old enough," he said, mirroring his response when Tubbo has asked that.

"Kid, who *are* you?" Phil asked, simply.

Tommy opened his mouth to give another bullshit half-truth, but someone else answered before he did.

"He's the last surviving crew member of the *H.M.S Fran*," Tubbo said.

He whirled to face the shorter boy wearing black slacks and a red jumper, bandages poking out from under his shirt instead of his prison clothes. The elevator doors slid shut behind him, Sapnap silent.

"Hey," Tubbo said softly, as all eyes shifted to him.

Phil jumped up and walked over to the shorter boy, giving him a quick hug. "It's nice to see you safe," he said.

"Most of me," Tubbo grinned. Harvey cheered and stood up from the console, walking over and clapping Tubbo on the uninjured side.

"*Excuse me*," Wilbur said. "But is nobody going to address what Tubbo just said?" He glanced at Tommy, who was trying to sidle away and back into the elevator. Techno just stared at him.

"What?" he snarked when the attention of the room was once more put on him. "Can I go now?" He glanced at Tubbo. "Come on, man, you didn't have to say that."

"You'd have told them that you stole a spaceship or something." Tubbo snickered, but that was precisely what he *had* told them, so...

"For your information, that's a very believable lie—"

"Tommy," Philza said, blue eyes watching him. "Did you serve on the *H.M.S Fran*?"

"No," he said shortly, and six exhalations of relief were detected throughout the compartment. Tubbo's eye twitched in exasperation. "I was too young to serve as anything but an inconvenience." He grinned good-naturedly. "I was born on that ship, though."

"You—" Phil said, jaw-dropping.

"Yeah, except the escape pod failed and—" He made some vague gestures. "Boom. The ship blew up." He tilted his head, glaring at Tubbo, *daring* him to say anything. For once, Tubbo kept silent, pursing his lips. "Then they sort of killed everyone else after they refused to give up any information, but I played dumb, and I was just captured."

"You were in that prison for six years?" Techno asked.

No. He swallowed. "Y-yes." He did not want to remember what came in between, from when he was twelve to nearly sixteen. He did not want to remember—it was only a *dream*, a reality that didn't exist. He told himself that, but in his heart, he knew that he was lying to everyone and himself.

"I checked the logs," Tubbo said slowly. "His first entry was Stardate 97804.14. That's three days after the *H.M.S Fran* was attacked."

"Stop with the fucking pity," he snapped, seeing the looks in the eyes around the room. "Man, I'm not their fucking bitch or some shit. I don't know why I'm still alive." *Yes, you do. Don't lie.* "I'm just a sixteen-year-old kid who was in the wrong damned place at the wrong time. I already know you want another survivor; Tubbo already said that."

"I did *not*—"

"Yeah, you did."

"You are an Avian," Phil noted out of nowhere.

"...what?" he said after a moment, just a touch too late.

You are nothing like him.

"You're an Avian," Tubbo said, almost reverently. "That makes so much more sense now! That's why you're a vegetarian!"

"I—thanks, Tubbo," he muttered. "Yeah, fine, I'm a fucking Avian. So what? Half the crew on the *H.M.S Fran* were Avians."

"Yeah...nearly the only Avians left in the galaxy, and now that the others are gone..." Wilbur pointed out, and Tommy *really really* wanted to point out that that wasn't true but bit down on his tongue to stop his mouth from running. "So, it's just you now."

Tommy knew that that wasn't exactly accurate. On the other hand, he wasn't *sure* if it was false. Not anymore. After all, it had been two years since...well, since the Incident. And *he* was a relentless bastard, so Tommy had no doubt *he* was either crawling to his grave or hiding in some unknown corner of the universe waiting to fucking die. "Whatever," he muttered, settling for the stupid answer that it was. "Can I fucking go now? I'm hungry."

He wasn't hungry. He didn't know what he considered hunger anymore. Sometimes he lay awake at night and remembered the pangs in his chest and heard the whimpers of his friends. At least in the prison, he was guaranteed a meal.

"Sure," Philza said, as just about half the bridge crew opened their mouth to argue.

"I'll take him," Tubbo said.

Harvey pointed a finger at him. "You will *not*."

Philza nodded. "Sorry, Tubbo. I need to talk to you and Sapnap about...matters."

"Is it about the secret mission that he told me all about?" Tommy drawled. Philza glanced at him, and Tubbo stiffened. "Yeah, okay, shutting up."

"Clementine," Techno said. "Can you contact the quartermaster and tell him to come here to take our...guest...to the cafeteria for some grub?"

Two things happened. First, Tommy's breath hitched as he heard the name— *recognized* the name. Secondly, an A.I. answered with an explanation that made him want to fall to the ground and faint.

» **Certainly, Commander. Summoning Quartermaster Purpled to the bridge now.** «

Her feminine voice filled Tommy's head as his mind flashed to nine years prior, to his dad fiddling with something as he sat in the captain's chair, telling Tommy that he was creating an A.I. that had the voice of a family member long gone.

And—the other name.

Purpled.

His head spun as he tried to understand what was going on—why was his luck so fucking sick? He'd just wanted to retire—maybe on Terra or Kaverwall, those were populated, and no power-hungry governors would try to start a genocide.

His past was catching up with him.

"I think...I'll meet him halfway," Tommy said, throat dry.

"Do you even know your way around the ship?" Dream asked him, seemingly unaware of the sweat that trickled down Tommy's neck as he tried not to drop and curl up in a ball and sob.

"It's the same layout as the *H.M.S Fran*," he said. "I'll be fine." There were some suspicious glares, but Philza held up his hand and let him go—though everyone was unaware of the state of mind his head sang. He all but shoved his way into the elevator, only sinking to his knees when the door closed and he'd pressed the button that led to the level of the cafeteria.

God, *why*?

Why couldn't he just have some peace?

» **Tommy.** «

"Clementine," he said, with shaky breaths.

» **It has been a while, son of my creator.** «

"A while, indeed," he murmured. *Brother*, she did not say. She was not his sister. Not ever, not despite the name. A.I's did not have sisters.

» **You have changed.** «

"You have not."

» **Why do you wish for others not to know of your birth?** «

"I don't like questions," he muttered. "They—they can't know about Sam and Puffy, Clementine, they *can't*."

» **Sometimes I do not understand the reasoning of the living, but I will abide by your commands, Tommy.** «

"They cannot know," he insisted, thinking of his aunt Puffy and her white hair and smiling face. "They can't know," he repeated, thinking of his dad, with his tinkering hands and smile. "They can't know that I know you or that they were my family."

» **I do not understand how withholding information will help anyone.** «

"I *hate* questions," he snarled, tears sliding down his face. "I—what happened...they can't know. I just want to go home, Clementine."

» **The last place you referred to as home was the *H.M.S Fran*. Have circumstances changed?**
«

Clementine was blunt, as usual. She did not totally comprehend feelings, even six years later. He swallowed. "No," he said softly. "My home is gone."

» **Then why do you try to flee?** «

"I want away from this," he said. "All of this. The Galactic Rebellion, the Arachnids—I want to go ."

» You are aware that two years ago, Quartermaster Purpled offered you a home among his brothers? «

He does not want to think of that place. He does not want to speak the words aloud.

» You are aware that you are the sole survivor of the Red Planet's Genocide that can accurately account the whole story? «

"No," he murmured. "*No*. You—you—how do you know this?"

» Quartermaster Purpled appeared to have nightmares when he first came onboard the *L'manburg*, and upon further pushing, would not visit one of the counselors that we have onboard. So I offered to talk to him, and he talked to me about what transpired until he fell asleep. He proceeded to do so for many stardates. «

A slight pause as Tommy tried to grasp the fact that Purpled was *alive*. Again. There had been an inkling that it was another Purpled—he knew it hadn't been, but it had been nice to live in a fantasy world for a *bit*—and not *his* Purpled.

» As an AI, I cannot have emotions...but to use the breathing term, I expressed surprise upon finding that Purpled retained knowledge of you. «

"And you told him, didn't you?" Tommy asked thickly.

» As I had received no prior orders to say otherwise—yes, Tommy. I told Quartermaster Purpled of your parents and the *H.M.S Fran*. He chose not to tell anyone else because it would lead to questions that he did not want to answer. «

Tommy snorted. "We are still similar in that sense, then."

» We arrived at our destined floor three point seven two minutes ago, Tommy. Purpled is waiting outside, and he—much in the living fashion—grows impatient. «

Tommy stood up, staring at the opaque door, and what he knew lay beyond. He took a breath. "You can—open the door, I suppose." The metal slid open smoothly without a response, and Tommy stared into magenta eyes that widened as they took him in.

Purpled—Purpled hadn't changed. He was still slightly shorter than Tommy, with his dirty blonde hair and fuschia eyes that held back pain—but he was undeniably Purpled.

"Holy shit—Tommy?"

"Hey," he said softly, and then Purpled was squeezing him half to death, and Tommy had to concentrate on breathing, laughing softly as he embraced his friend for the first time in two years.

"You dumb idiot," Purpled scowled as he stepped back, shedding a few tears. "I thought you were dead."

"Nah, I was just in prison."

"By—"

"No," he said shortly. "I flew into Arachnid airspace, and they were pretty interested since I'm the only living Avian."

Purpled tilted his head, eyes wary. He had explained that his eyes were a congenital disability of some kind—like Ranboo's albinism—but Tommy was still slightly unsettled when they tried to read him. "And—are you?"

"Am I what?"

Purpled snorted. "Don't play dumb, Tommy. I went to school with you, and you would play on the simulations all day and get perfect test scores."

Tommy sighed. "I don't know," he said. "Not anymore."

"Okay," Purpled said and left it at that. "Do you want to get food?" Tommy looked at him—and then laughed. Purpled frowned. "Did I say something funny?"

"No," he said. "It's just—well, I've never heard you ask me to go get food in years." He hesitated. "Not from you, at least."

Purpled smirked as he realized what Tommy was talking about. "Come on, you shithead," he said. "Do you still like the leafy shit?"

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Yes. Carrots, if you have them. Golden apples?"

"Golden apples are highly addictive forms of food," Purpled said as if he was quoting something.

"Well, they didn't have proper food for Avians, so they gave me them," Tommy said.

Purpled frowned. "I gotta tell Niki and—" He froze, glancing at Tommy. "—um, Ranboo."

"Ranboo's here?" Tommy asked, blinking in surprise.

"Yeah," Purpled said with a small smile as they traversed the white halls of *L'manburg*. As it was the same make as his home ship, Tommy kept expecting to round the corner and see his aunt or his dad standing there.

But no, they had been dead for nearly seven years. They were never coming back.

"He's a nurse under Niki and with my brother, Ponk," Purpled continued, not seeming to notice Tommy's internal battle.

"And uh, does he..."

"Remember?" Purpled cut in. "No. Not much. Flashes. Feelings. Emotions." He frowned. "He knows—a bit. I told him about you, you know."

"And yet you didn't tell anyone else," Tommy noted sourly.

"No," Purpled murmured. "I said there was another, but I never talked about you to the crew or my family." He glanced away. "I knew you were alive, though. Not because there were signs—but because you've always been too stubborn to die."

"Thanks."

"Besides," Purpled continued. "Would you have—wanted me to tell them about our endeavors on the Red Planet?" He shot Tommy a shaky grin. "*I* don't even know the full story, Tommy. I was half delirious out of my mind. I just remember you telling me about—you know. Them. The other three stars. There's...nothing else from my side. You went on the missions; *you* went to Pogtopia. You were there when—" He broke off.

"When they were executed," Tommy finished, his chest hurting as three faces floated in front of his face, reminding him of his failures. "Yeah. I know."

Chapter End Notes

Yeah...nah...you ain't gonna get a reunion scene that easily...

...Wilbur has no idea...

The Merling Menace

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*'Tis better to have
loved and lost than never to
have loved at all.*

- Alfred Lord Tennyson

A brown-haired man with an oddly-sewn apron—purple and green and yellow and had a cyan swirl drawn in what looked like shitty markers on the front—had handed two plates to Purpled and Tommy after a second of speaking with the magenta-eyed boy. He hadn't questioned the random kid on the ship, instead choosing to make conversation with Purpled about some white castle and tree that they'd found on their last mission.

Whatever that meant.

Tommy didn't really care about that, but what he *did* care about were the best carrots of his life that sat in front of him. Holy *shit*, it was fucking amazing.

"Slow down," Purpled told him, eating a slice of ham that had fallen out of his sandwich.

"Shut up," he said, spraying carrot bits everywhere. Purpled rolled his eyes good-naturedly and pretended to look disgusted.

Tommy could barely remember the last time he'd had *good* food. It had been at least six years—almost seven, now. Before the Wasteland, food had been—had been *that place*—and then before

that had been the Wasteland—again—so safe to say it had been a while. Needless to say, the carrots were *really* fucking good. "Do you have any golden apples?" he asked, almost in afterthought.

Purpled froze. "Uh—no, Tommy. Those are drugs."

"Drugs are cool."

"No—no, they're not," Purpled snorted. "I need to take you to Niki so she can get you medication for that."

"What's *wrong* with golden apples?" he demanded defensively.

"They're a food substitute," Purpled said. "For lazy people. They're also highly addictive and mess up your liver—"

"Okay, okay," Tommy interrupted. "We get it; you're a nerd." He paused. "Please? Just one?"

"No," Purpled said firmly. "They're bad for you."

"They can't be *that* bad," he muttered, stabbing at his salad with the metal fork irritably. It was weird having a utensil that was actually sharp instead of the dulled-down ones at the prison. He could probably stab someone's eye out with this.

"They're awful," Purpled said, matter-of-factly.

"I've eaten them for like two years."

"Yeah, and now you need to *stop* before you die," Purpled said.

"With that fuckhead still around, I'm probably gonna die anyway," he muttered.

Purpled froze, his sandwich dropping back onto the plate. Tommy had to muffle a laugh at the dumbstruck look on his pale face. Fortunately, the cafeteria was empty—standard time, it was the middle of the day. "He's *alive*?"

Tommy blinked. "Yeah. That's why I didn't want to leave the prison until good ol' Tubbo convinced me to board your shit. I mean ship."

Purpled pushed his face away, looking vaguely sick. He put his face in his hands, his dirty blonde hair falling over his fingers. Tommy frowned. "We reported him as dead," the magenta-eyed boy groaned. "You're telling me he's *alive*?"

"Course," Tommy snorted, trying to remain upbeat and not think—of him. "He escaped into Arachnid space. That's how I got captured again." Tommy paused. "I don't think he knew where I was. That's why I stayed. So—" he swallowed. "—so I wouldn't have to go to any more boarding schools." Or, you know. Starve.

"We have to tell them," Purpled said.

"No," Tommy said firmly.

"He's a war criminal," Purpled insisted. "We—the Galactic Rebellion will send other people after him, looking, Tommy, you won't have to see a hide or hair." He managed a shaky grin. "Just—they have to know, or they won't look. We could—save people. Children, maybe. If he's doing the same thing."

As much as he loathed to admit it, Purpled was right. They *had* to tell the captain so he could contact—wait, no, they didn't.

"Can't you send a private message to—to your leader?" Tommy asked. "I don't—I don't want to talk about it."

"Sooner or later, you will," Purpled warned.

"No, I won't."

"You *will*," Purpled said. "You know what they say, right? The past *always* catches up to you. You can't just keep hiding, Tommy." He hesitated. "Where—where were you planning to go, anyway?"

Tommy shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe become a transport pilot or something. Earn some credits. Then retire on an enjoyment planet—something like that. Enjoy the beach. *See* a beach."

"You're better than that, Tommy," Purpled said. "You're too good for that type of job." He tilted his head. "We saw how you flew. I—you have natural talent. You should—should join the Galactic Rebellion."

"*What?*"

"You *should*," Purpled insisted. "Look, Phil can probably get you a place."

"But I don't..." Tommy trailed off. Sam had always talked about settling down for a few years and having Tommy go to a good flight school like the one his parents and aunt had. Then, he'd thought it would be some private school and hadn't wanted to.

Looking back, he knew that it was the Fleet school. That it was *the* school of the Galactic Rebellion, located on Terra.

"I know you do," Purpled said. "You talked about it."

"That was a long time ago," Tommy said through gritted teeth, balling his hands under the table.

"It was three years ago."

"A lot has changed in three years."

Purpled didn't argue, changing the subject. "I can't actually get a comms link through to Command. We'll have to go to Wilbur for that."

"Or we could *sneak*—"

"No," Purpled said firmly. "We're going to tell him or the entire crew. Your choice."

"That's not a choice and more of blackmail."

"Yes," Purpled said. "But I'm not keeping secrets when he could come looking for—for *you* and me and Ranboo."

Tommy swallowed, thinking of brown grass and screams and a body hitting the ground in front of him, their eyes open and unseeing. "Okay," he agreed in a small voice. "Fine."

Purpled flashed him a smile that was more menacing than it was friendly. "Good. Let's stop by medbay first." He glanced at Tommy's empty tray. "To uh—get you off your golden apple addiction."

"It's not an addiction; I can quit at any time," Tommy grumbled. "I just don't want to," he added.

"Uh-huh," Purpled said, getting up and stepping away from the bench. Tommy followed him as they headed down a different hallway. Despite having memorized the *HMS Fran* as a child, he'd forgotten where some places were. One of them being the medbay. "Five stages. The first one, denial."

"Five stages of *grief*, not fucking addiction," he pointed out.

"You're grieving the loss of your golden apples."

"Shut up, bitch."

Purpled smirked as they turned the corner, nodding briefly to a Blazeborn in a red and black cloak, who smiled kindly and stepped by to let them pass. "You know," he said, once the—Tommy didn't know his position on the ship—Blazeborn passed. "You haven't changed much."

"I've gotten taller," he pointed out, remembering when he had just barely been taller than his friend. They'd both gotten taller, with Purpled still taller than him by a good inch, but there was no doubt that they were no longer the short children they'd been on Pogtopia.

"I meant personality-wise."

"Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome," Purpled said, stopping outside a door and placing his hand on the scanner. It opened to reveal what was clearly a hospital—or medbay, in this case. Tommy froze when he saw Tubbo sitting on one of the cots, his sister shining a bright light into his eyes, and the woman called Niki standing patiently by. In the background, organizing some tools, was an Enderian—half-albino—that had one green eye and one red, though he was not currently facing Tommy enough to see the familiar glimmering pupils.

"Hey, Tommy," Tubbo said quietly.

Ranboo whirled, his eyes widening. Tommy winced quietly, and Purpled gave a quick shake of his head as Ranboo opened his mouth. Fortunately, despite having amnesia, Ranboo was able to discern to shut the hell up before he spilled every secret that Tommy had ever had to the three remaining members of the room.

"Hey, Purpled!" Niki said brightly, turning to face them closely. Tommy wondered if the tube that fed water up to her nose so she could breathe was painful. "And—the kid that wouldn't tell me his name. Tommy, apparently."

"Right," Purpled said. "Hey, Tubbo. Niki. Lani." The shorter girl nodded before muttering something to Niki, who adjusted her hand slightly.

"My eyes," Tubbo muttered.

"Oh, you can hold still for a second," Lani said briskly.

"Ranboo," Purpled said. Ranboo was still staring at Tommy, his eyebrows furrowed. "Um, I brought Tommy here for..." he trailed off.

"Is he injured?" Niki asked, stepping closer, her bright eyes surveying him.

"No, apparently I have an addiction," Tommy said.

"To what?" Niki asked as Ranboo's head shot up to meet his gaze, and Tubbo glanced at him before his sister adjusted his head so she could continue his...eye check-up, or whatever. She gestured to one of the cots closest to the door. "Sit down, please."

Tommy debated arguing but gave up and sat down heavily, tugging at his t-shirt uncomfortably. "It's not an addiction."

"It's an addiction," Purpled clarified from where he leaned against the doorframe, which was now closed.

"It's *not*. I can stop at any time."

Niki snorted unprofessionally. "As if I haven't heard *that* before." She tilted her head, propping her hands on her hips. "Vape? You don't smell fruity. I don't think it's heroin, though you *are* thin—"

"Look, as much as enjoy the drug talk, I resent that," he interrupted. "I'm not a fucking heroin addict, okay? Or—or cocaine, or any of that shit. Not even weed, unfortunately."

"Unfortunately?" Ranboo asked, and Tommy inhaled sharply. It had—been a while since he'd heard that voice. And even longer since he'd heard the Enderian speak a coherent word besides his mutterings that he'd had—*then*.

"It's a joke," Purpled said. "Ah—Niki, it's golden apples."

"Ah," Niki sighed. "This is why I hate the Arachnids. They don't feed their prisoners properly."

"That's the *only* reason?" Tommy asked.

"No," Niki said. "But it's pretty high on the list."

"He's an Avian, Niki," Tubbo piped up. "I'm guessing they were too lazy to give him a proper diet, so they did golden apples."

"Which is never good," Niki lamented. "Well, at least it doesn't have too bad of withdrawal effects." She smiled kindly. "Sorry about that, though. We'll get you better in no time."

"But they taste good," he complained.

"Yeah, and that's never a good sign," Niki said. "Good things tend to be bad for you." Tommy snorted quietly. "How long have you been eating them?"

"Uh—two years," he said. Niki raised an eyebrow. "Um—well, four, actually—when I was ten 'till I was twelve, and then there was a..." he glanced at Purpled, who gave him an *I'm-not-going-to-cover-your-ass* look. "...surplus of greens, so I had a break until I was nearly fifteen. And then until now." Technically, he wasn't lying.

Technically.

"And you're...?"

"Seventeen," he said. Everyone in the room gave him *that look*, and he threw up his hands. "Four days away until seventeen."

"Really?" Purpled said. "Wow, I haven't celebrated your birthday—" he cut himself off. "I meant I hadn't celebrated *a* birthday in a while."

"Wasn't it Bad's birthday two days ago?" Niki asked.

"Yeah, but I meant like someone *my* age," Purpled said hastily.

Nice save, Tommy thought wryly.

"...okay," Niki said, clearly not believing him. "Well, I'll have Karl bake you a cake or something." At Tommy's frown, she clarified, "He's the guy in the makeshift apron."

"Oh, the weird-looking guy," Tommy said.

"We're all weird looking here," Tubbo called out as he batted away Lani's flashlight. "Okay, get that thing away from my face, Lani."

Lani grinned at Tommy, finally putting down the flashlight and flicking it off. "Wait, you're not going to shine that thing in *my* eyes, are you? Because I have naturally dilated pupils, what with being an Avian and all that." Tommy had literally no idea if that was true or not, he just didn't want a bright light in his eyes.

"No," Niki said with a bit of merriment in her voice. "We don't plan on doing that. I was just showing Lani how to look at the corneas and retinas."

"Yeah, while blinding me," Tubbo grumbled. His sister poked him in the chest, and he shooed her away.

"I have absolutely no idea what the fuck you just said," Tommy announced.

"Good thing you're going to study piloting at Fleet School instead of medical, then," Purpled snorted.

Niki turned to look at him. "He's what?"

"That's not decided," Tommy said.

"No, wait, that's a good idea!" Tubbo said eagerly. "Then after you've graduated in a few years, you can come on *this* ship and learn under Dream or something!"

"What—no!" Tommy said. Tubbo jabbed a finger in Purpled's direction, the magenta-eyed boy maintaining his smug expression. "We didn't *agree* on that!"

"But you want to," Purpled said. "You really really do."

"I—" Tommy said. "That's beside the point. I have no plans to do that, *or* step foot in this stupid place after I'm dropped off."

"If you call my medbay stupid one more time, I will jab you with a paralyzation needle so hard that you'll be unable to move until your birthday," Niki said frostily.

He swallowed as Tubbo and Ranboo choked on a laugh. Purpled outright chuckled, and Tommy flipped him off before turning back to Niki. "Yes, ma'am."

"That's what I thought," she said. "And I think you'd do great at Fleet School, Tommy. Maybe you'll graduate in five years instead of the usual seven!"

"No," he said. "I have no intention of dying like—like my dad did."

"In a cool fiery explosion in space?" Lani asked.

Tubbo hissed. "Lani, that was a terrible way of expressing your condolences."

"It was?" Lani blinked. "Oh. Sorry." She seemed genuinely apologetic, which was at least something. "Who was your dad, anyway?" Tubbo cringed slightly as he knew the answer, and Ranboo and Purpled blinked rapidly.

"An Avian," Tommy said.

"That's not an answer."

"I don't care," he said. "I've already said too much." Tubbo rolled his eyes, and Purpled gave a loud sigh. Niki cleared her throat, and when Tommy turned to face her, he blanched at the silver hypospray in her hand. "I don't think that's *quite* necessary—"

"Try me," she said.

"I could sue for harassment," he warned, scooting down the cot as she took a threatening step closer. Purpled, Ranboo, Lani, and Tubbo, watched with merriment as he darted away. Fuck them.

"My medbay, my rules," Niki said airily.

"I don't think that's quite how it works."

A glint shined in the Merling's eyes, the shorter woman seeming suddenly deadly. "I *could* be using a protodynoplaser on you. Or an Osteogenic stimulator. Or a phoretic analyzer—"

"No thanks," he said loudly. "And fuck you guys." This was directed at the other kids in the room, four of which were laughing loudly. Ranboo was at least still attempting to smother his grin. "If I die, you're not going in the will."

"You have no personal belongings," Purpled deadpanned.

"Fuck off," he snarled, and then Niki's hand was on the other side of his neck—*she'd surprise-attacked him*—and the needle from the hypospray was being injected into his neck. He yelped, reaching for it, but she's already pulled away. "Ranboo," she said as if she hadn't just nearly *murdered* him. "Can you put that in the cleanser in a bit?"

"Yeah," Ranboo said.

"Don't think I can't hear you, Tommy," Niki said, and Tommy froze from where he was muttering things under his breath. "Yes, that's what I thought." She tilted her head as Tommy scowled at the ground, rubbing his neck. "Hey, do you mind if I take a bit of bloodwork? I want to study your genes. The Avians were a very secretive people, so we don't really understand their genetics."

"This one would prefer if that strategy continued," he said, standing up furiously.

"Maybe later, Niki," Purpled said in a low voice. "I think we've already pushed him far enough today."

Niki let out a tiny breath. "Okay. The hypospray should remove some of the elements from your body," she told Tommy. "Just don't go eating any golden apples. And if you have some extreme withdrawals within twenty-four hours, then come right back here so we can monitor you. Different species react differently to the recession of golden apples from their body."

"Aren't you like...a sort of science officer?" he asked. "Shouldn't you be able to tell me how bad they'll be?"

"No," Niki said. "As I said, the Avians were a pretty secretive species. We don't even know if they're distinctive from being human, despite not being able to digest meats."

"Like if they have any epic magical abilities," Tubbo said eagerly.

"No," Niki sighed. "It would be psychological, or perhaps of the mind. It's not *magic*; it's biology."

"Whatever," Tubbo said. "So...do you have any magic, Tommy?"

"Um," Tommy said. He was the last of the Avians—at least, *damn well close enough*, he thought. They deserved to know something. "We can run faster," he offered weakly.

Niki raised an eyebrow. "Really? That's intriguing—"

"Boo, boring," Tubbo called.

"Tubbo, shut up," Ranboo said, smacking him across the back of his head. "You literally *can't* run because Shulkers have smaller lungs and are smaller people and don't have the capacity to move far at all."

"*Lani* can't run; I did track at school and was on Varsity—"

"Anything else?" Niki interrupted before the two boys formed a further argument.

"Um..." Tommy said. "I—species secrets."

"Fine, okay," Niki said. "But don't think I won't take your bloodwork before I leave," she called.

"You won't," he said, pausing outside the medbay doors as they slid open smoothly for them.

"If we start bleeding out and I don't know your blood type, it's on you, then," Niki warned good-naturedly.

He paused in the doorway, Purpled waving goodbye to his friends. "O negative," he said after a moment.

"What?" Ranboo asked.

"O negative," he repeated. "My blood type. It's O negative. For references, *all* Avians had O negative blood type, believe it or not." He vaguely remembered Sam telling him that.

Niki's eyes were wide. "Celestial blood donors," she said.

"Yes," Tommy said. "I am...well aware of how much people said we were worth because we could freely give humans our blood, and their bodies wouldn't reject it." He shook his head. "It is one of the reasons we stayed together. Much like the Elytrians would call a flock." Niki nodded knowingly as the door slid shut again, cutting off the four from Purpled and Tommy.

"Niki's dying of curiosity, you know," Purpled said. "I think George would be pressuring you for a check-up as well, but he's fast asleep. As usual."

"George is...?" Tommy asked.

"Ah, the Chief Science Officer," Purpled said. "He's pretty smart...when he's not flirting with Dream, setting things on fire with Sapnap, or sleeping."

"Wait, Dream and George are dating?"

"No," Purpled said. "They're just bros doing bro things." He started walking down the hallway. "Let's go find Wilbur."

"Why do you need me?"

Tommy yelped, throwing up his hands in a low defensive position as he whirled to see Wilbur standing beside them in a corridor that had been empty a few seconds ago. "What the fuck?" The tall brown-haired man cocked an eyebrow at him, seemingly unimpressed.

"Hello, Ghostbur," Purpled said mockingly, as Tommy put his hands down carefully, trying to calm his racing heart.

"Don't call me that," Wilbur said. "I'm a *Phantom*, not a ghost. You don't go around calling Eret Ghostet."

"Eret doesn't intrude upon private conversations," Purpled said.

"The conversation was *about* me."

"I'm pretty sure there are procedures and rules that ban you from doing that," Tommy pointed out.

"How would you know?" Wilbur asked, his form flashing from tangible to transparent threateningly.

Tommy raised an unimpressed eyebrow. "I was born on a spaceship, you know," he said. "Avian and all that. I read the manuals for fun when my dad left for the missions on dangerous planets."

Wilbur looked confused. "They let a kid be on a spaceship alone?"

"No," Tommy scoffed. "There were engineers and nurses around." He grinned. "One time, when I was nine, I had to kickstart the *H.M.S Fran* into working because the helmsman was sprayed by some porous plant that caused her to hallucinate."

He didn't specify that the helmsman was his aunt.

"You mean Captain Puffy?" Wilbur said, voicing his thoughts but not his familial lines. "I never read about that in the reports. What happened to the second-in-command?"

"Dead," Tommy said stiffly. He'd never really met the Avian that had been Puffy's second, but he had remembered his father and aunt saddened by his never coming back from a scouting trip. He remembered the frantic searching, and he remembered a fiery pyre and downcast eyes of a sepulture outside a radiant white ship on a pink planet of perennials.

"Oh. Right."

"I don't think they would put something that could get Puffy's captain license revoked in their reports," Purpled said, rolling his eyes.

Wilbur snorted. "You learn more and more every day," he murmured, his eyes flashing to Tommy for a brief second before they returned to Purpled. "So. Why did you need to find me?"

"Not here," Purpled said briskly. "Too many ears."

"There are only two Phantoms on board, and as you like to point out, I'm the only one capable—sorry, *rude* enough to listen in," Wilbur said.

"It's secrets," Purpled said. "I don't want to risk it."

"Really?" Wilbur said, his lips crooking up into a shallow smile as his gaze once again halted on Tommy. "Secrets? I like secrets. It seems Tommy here is hiding more than a few things, eh?"

"So what?" he bristled as Purpled directed them down the corridor once more.

"So...don't you think that these secrets are important to tell?" Wilbur asked him.

"That's why I'm *telling* you," he said. "Against my will."

"Yeah, I convinced him," Purpled called over his shoulder.

"They can't be that bad, right?" Wilbur asked him.

Purpled typed in a code on the scanner, and Tommy was too distracted to try to remember it—unlike the elevator number—as his entire life flashed before his eyes. The room that opened up was a sitting room, but the lights flicked on as Tommy walked in, noting the chairs' positions and the seating arrangements. He sat down heavily on one of the plush couches, Wilbur settling across from him. After a second—and after the door had shut—Purpled sat down next to Tommy, but not close enough so they would accidentally touch.

"Yeah," he muttered, his throat suddenly thick. "It's bad."

"So tell us."

"I don't want to," he said stubbornly.

Purpled sighed. "Tommy—"

"It's not like you're telling yours, either," Tommy huffed.

Purpled stiffened. "I don't *need* to talk about the Red Planet," he said in a low voice. "They got what they needed about—about—" he stuttered on the words. "—Chroma and the Children's Rebellion, and they didn't *need* the details."

Tommy closed his eyes briefly. He wished he was strong enough to say—say that *name*—he wished he was strong enough to think about that time.

But he wasn't, and so he ignored it instead. He was sure that wasn't a perfect coping method, but his parents weren't around to tell him differently, so...

"Hey, let's not compare your experiences to the Red Planet's Genocide," Wilbur said warningly, his eyes flashing. Purpled had his eyes squeezed shut, trying not to cry.

Tommy laughed dryly, rubbing his face. Little did they know that it was the *same* experience—except *he* was the leader of the Children's Rebellion, and *he* had been close—close enough—to Chroma, and *he* had watched children get executed on the streets below the watchful eye of a prideful man that had refused to call for help.

Of three thousand, two hundred, and seventy-three, there were only two survivors known to history.

He was not one of them.

Chapter End Notes

yes Lani is not good at emotions (she is a child)

Also Wilbur being Ghostbur and listening to conversations smh

Yeah, bitch, a mass murderer isn't dead, and I didn't tell you 'cause of my angsty past

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Trying to avoid sadness

is trying to avoid life.

- Maxime Lagacé

"It's about—Chroma," Purpled choked out. Wilbur looked at him worryingly.

"Are you sure you don't want to see Bad, Purpled?" the Chief Communications Officer asked carefully.

Purpled shook his head stubbornly. "I've seen him enough," he muttered. "I have to—keep moving forward." His eyes flashed to Tommy before going back to his hands. "It's just practice, Wil. Just practice."

"Sounds more like a pain to me," Wilbur said.

"You have no idea," Purpled muttered, scrubbing at his eyes with the corner of his uniformed sleeve. "Anyway—um. Chroma—he's—" Purpled choked on his own words, and Tommy nudged him with his elbow.

"He's alive," Tommy spat, forcing the words out of his throat. Wilbur's brown eyes widened, and Tommy amended his statement. "Um...I think."

"No, no," Wilbur said, more in denial than disbelief. "No, he's dead."

"They're only dead if you see the body," Tommy said. "He's not dead. I've seen him."

"You *what*?"

"In—passing," Tommy lied. "It's not important."

"He's a murderer. I think it is."

"Look, Mr. I'm So Smart, I was in a *prison* full of war criminals and poor attempts at spies," Tommy said. "I saw a shit ton of people in my time."

"And one of them was Chroma?" Wilbur asked dubiously.

"Yes," Tommy said. "Well, I think."

"I think that's good enough for me," Purpled said. "Just—contact Command and tell them to restart their search?"

"At what? The world of a child?"

"At the word of the survivor of the *H.M.S. Fran*," he corrected. "I'm not some nobody."

Wilbur sighed. "Look, kid, *I* believe you. Phil believes you. But Command won't. Not without evidence of who you are."

"I have evidence," he said.

Purpled turned to him questioningly. "You do?"

"Yeah," he said. "Clementine?"

"She's not going to answer you," Wilbur snorted. "She was programmed to listen to the crew, and you are not—"

» **Yes, Tommy?** «

Tommy immensely enjoyed the dumbstruck look that befell Wilbur's face. "Hey, Clementine, who am I?"

» **You were born on Stardate 81883.28 on the *H.M.S. Fran* on a Terran Saturday, Tommy. As a child, you ran around the ship, causing mass mayhem. Do not be discouraged, though, for the crew loved you and the other children. I was saddened to hear of your death, though when the Chief Operations Officer contacted the ship and I recognized your voice, I was as gladdened as I could be as artificial intelligence.** «

"Thanks," he muttered.

"Clementine remembers you," Wilbur noted.

» **That I do, Lieutenant Soot. Captain Philza dismissed wiping my databanks of the *H.M.S. Fran*, for he wanted to hear what happened to them. I remember Tommy quite well. The Avians were an enjoyable group of people. Unfortunately, you are one of the last of them.** «

Tommy closed his eyes, trying not to cry as Sam and Puffy's faces filled his peripheral, laughing as they tossed him up or fed him chocolate pudding. "You remember my parents, then?"

» **They were wonderful people.** «

He knew that Clementine would keep his secret—that she was, currently, keeping his secret. "Thanks, Clementine."

» **Of course, Tommy.** «

"You're not going to start crying, are you?" Wilbur asked him, brushing his brown hair out of his eyes.

"No," he snapped. "Tommy doesn't cry."

"Did you just speak about yourself in the third person?"

"He does that," Purpled said.

Wilbur sighed. "Well, I suppose there could be worse coping methods due to traumatic experiences. I'll write you up to talk to Bad."

"What—wait, is Bad some kind of chiropractor or thera-therapist or some shit?" he said. "No, no, no, no—"

"You sort of have to see someone so they can check your mental health before you enter Fleet school," Purpled pointed out, helpful as usual. "Sometimes."

"See, that's why I don't want to attend Fleet school," he said.

"I think you should," Wilbur said.

"I don't give a shit about your fucking opinion," Tommy snarled, his fists clenched. Wilbur blinked at him.

» Tommy, you have wanted this for years. Think of the person you could be. The people you could save. «

He pointed the finger at the ceiling angrily. "Shut the fuck up, Clementine! You're not helpful, as usual!"

» I was designed to be helpful— «

"And I was designed to kill people!" he said. "So shut up; otherwise, I'll find your little black box and rip it out myself!"

"Usually, I'd get mad for you for threatening Clementine, but I get the feeling that you're just ranting and wouldn't actually do jack shit," Wilbur sighed. "I—I'm gonna go send that message to Command. So that they could be on the lookout. Just. You know. In case."

"Oh," Tommy said. "Do you believe me?"

"I never said I didn't," Wilbur pointed out. "I...don't know you, Tommy. You seem like a childish gremlin with a perchance for murder and threats." He held up a hand as Tommy opened his mouth angrily. "You also seem like a nice kid that saved Tubbo and gave us some valuable information on the *H.M.S. Fran*. Do I trust you? No. But I trust him." He gestured to Purpled. "He trusts you."

"Thanks," Purpled said dryly.

Wilbur inclined his head in their direction before getting up to leave.

"Wait!" Tommy said. "You can't tell anyone else!"

"Yeah, actually, don't," Purpled said.

"That's against regulations," Wilbur said, his hand next to the door.

» Need I remind you, Lieutenant Soot, that earlier today you broke regulation 34.5 B-4, in which it states— «

"Yeah, yeah," Wilbur said. "Still. What about—"

"I'll *tell* Ranboo myself," Purpled said. "But the others don't need to know. *Especially* not Ponk and Punz."

"Why?" Wilbur whispered. "This changes everything."

"It's not ours to deal with," Purpled said.

"It is, actually."

"Just—don't, okay?" Purpled said.

"I'm sorry, Purpled, but I have to," Wilbur said. "It's part of my job."

"Wait," Tommy said as the door slid open with a breath of air. Wilbur turned to look at him, a tired glow filling his eyes for half a second as his Phantom half glimmered just under the surface. Tommy wasn't much phased. "Wilbur, you owe me a favor. I'm calling it now."

"What?" Wilbur said. "I—I literally met you a few hours ago, gremlin child."

Tommy snorted at the term of 'endearment.' "Nah. You met me seven years ago."

"I—did?"

"Yeah," he said, unphased and shoving his hands in his pockets. Even Purpled looked curious as he swung his magenta eyes to gaze at him. "Wilbur Soot. Seventeen. Messy brown hair and a broken guitar. Swore up and down, you were a musician, but the Arachnids didn't care, because *of course*, they didn't." Wilbur looked positively horrified by that point. "You were there accidentally, on a mission to—Snowshire, was it?"

"Snowchester," Wilbur corrected absentmindedly. "You-you're *him*." Surprise flickered in his eyes.

It wasn't really a question. So Tommy nodded jerkily.

"You didn't even tell *me* that!" Purpled complained.

"You guys haven't known each other that long," Wilbur said, sounding confused. "Why would he tell you?" Purpled shrugged, glancing at Tommy nervously. "Anyway, you're that kid that hacked me out."

"Yeah," he drawled. "I am. So you owe me a favor."

"I thought that was out of the goodness of your heart," Wilbur said, eyeing him with a slight frown.

Tommy laughed. "When you describe me, big man, *good* ain't a word you use." He paused theatrically. "Cynical, dishonest, vulgar, self-obsessed—"

"One might even say you have a superiority complex," Purpled pointed out helpfully. Tommy rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, whatever, bitch," he snorted. "It doesn't matter. *Technically*, you owe me a favor." He crossed his arms. "So don't tell them about this."

Wilbur blinked at him. Several expressions crossed his face—anger, annoyance, and a bit of respect. "Fine," he said, finally, and walked through the closed door, his eyes flashing slightly as he activated his Phantom form.

"Clementine, make sure he's not here," Tommy said after a few seconds of silence, sitting down heavily on the couches.

» The Lieutenant has withdrawn from his Phantom form and can be currently observed proceeding his way down Hallway 1A-6N. Do you require any additional information, Tommy Innes? «

"No," Tommy said heavily. "I don't." The day's events suddenly came crashing down on him, and he felt tears prickle at the corner of his eyes—but no! He wasn't weak!

Purpled seemed slightly in awe as he glanced around the room, probably looking for the speakers that Clementine's feminine voice emitted from. What he didn't know was that they were built into the walls in almost every room—though, cameras were only in the hold, the security center, the

bridge, and the hallways. "I don't have clearance to do that," he said, almost dreamily. "Tubbo doesn't either, and he's my boss."

"Tubbo's your boss?" Tommy asked.

Purpled nodded. "Quartermaster falls under Operations...so yeah." He laughed dryly. "I have a kid that's younger than me as the Chief Operations Officer." Purpled paused, saw Tommy's incredulous look, and then inclined his head softly. "He deserves it, though. Tubbo is brilliant."

"He is, now?" Tommy didn't attempt to keep the doubtfulness out of his voice.

"As brilliant as you are," Purpled nodded. "If you applied yourself."

"I don't know if that's a compliment or an insult," Tommy said.

"Both," Purpled laughed, elbowing him, and Tommy was reminded of golden grass and scarlet skies and staring at the night sky, mapping constellations and talking about a ship they'd have of their own one day. His chest hurt briefly—that dream was never meant to be, though, as much as he had loved it. "He's just a kid—a bit older than you by a few months, actually—but he's astute. He's the Chief Operations Officer, so that means he has the primary responsibility of ensuring that the ship functions—"

"—such that the use of the lateral sensor arrays does not interfere with one another. They must prioritize resource allocations so that the most critical activities can have every chance of success. If so required, they can curtail shipboard functions if they think they will interfere with the ship's current mission or routine operations," Tommy said robotically. Purpled looked at him, surprised. "Puffy made me memorize the book when I got in trouble."

"You must have gotten in trouble a lot," Purpled said.

Tommy shrugged. "I memorized the book, so they moved me on to memorizing the ship's blueprints. Every time I got in trouble—badly, more than a brief scolding—Dad would hand over a piece of paper, and I would get to draw the ship, room by room, centimeter by centimeter."

"You know," Purpled said after a moment. "It's still odd that—that people like Captain Puffy and Captain Sam were your family. Captain Sam was your father."

"Yes," he said. "And I didn't actually know they were part of the Galactic Rebellion until I figured it out for myself." He grinned lazily. "They weren't exactly secretive about it. I think they were waiting for me to figure it out myself."

"Still," Purpled said. "Being *aboard* the *H.M.S. Fran*? That must have been epic!"

Tommy laughed. "It was more than epic, Purpled," he said reproachfully. "It was *home*. I was born there. I grew up planet-hopping and going on missions—though I didn't know that at the time. It was...just a ship, in the end. As legendary as they were, nothing is invincible." He shrugged. "It was just home, to me."

At promptly 0700 the next day, Tommy heard a loud knock on the door. He grumbled, pulling the sheets over his head.

"Fuck off," he called and rolled over and fell asleep.

Five seconds later, the sheets are taken off his head, and Tommy yelped at the wave of cold air, curling into a ball.

"Time to get up," Tubbo chirped, flicking on the lights.

"What the fucking hell, you bitch!" he snarled, scrambling for a semblance of warmth, his sleeping clothes, given to him by a passing yeoman after Purpled had shown him his rooms, suddenly thin. "It's too early for this bullshit!"

"This is the standard start to every morning," Tubbo told him.

"Well, it's not mine, so I'm going back to bed."

"Nope!" Tubbo said, dodging Tommy—more like stepping back, but Tommy liked to think that he made a more astounding move than trying to blearily grab at the sheets in Tubbo's arms. "Phil told me to show you around—note, convince you to join Fleet school, under Wilbur and Purpled's proddings."

"Oh, great, so you're a glorified babysitter," Tommy said through gritted teeth.

"Yep!" Tubbo said, pulling a pair of clothes—yeesh, ship uniforms—from his Shulker-storage-dimensional-thing—look, Tommy wasn't very good at explanations at seven in the morning—and tossing them at Tommy's chest. "Put those on. I'll be waiting outside."

With that, he was gone. Tommy blinked, trying to comprehend what in the hell just happened as he stared at the fourth-dimensional clothes in his hands.

Man, fuck that guy.

"Any chance you could lock the door and I could go back to sleep?" he asked Clementine hopefully, throwing a hand dramatically over his face.

» While the order would technically go through, I sincerely recommend you follow the Chief Operations Officer. Also, I would have to notify Captain Philza of your negligence to follow Lieutenant Tubbo's management, and he would be less than pleased. «

"So that's a no, then."

Clementine did not respond.

Tommy was not anymore awake when the clock read 0713, and he stumbled out the door. Tubbo bounced on the balls of his heels, his datapad disappearing into the fourth dimension. "Let's go get some breakfast!"

"It's...too early to have breakfast," he grumbled. Tubbo poked him in the arm.

"It's never too early for the most important meal of the day!"

Diligently, he followed Tubbo through the halls, half-asleep on his feet. It felt like a fever dream, wandering through the halls—as if he was still asleep and this wasn't his body. He'd blink and lose a few seconds and wondered if he could fall asleep and still accompany Tubbo.

He *did* fall asleep on his arms at the table as Tubbo walked off to find them a plate of food—he'd adamantly refused to stand in that line to get his own because his feet were dead, and so was he—only to wake up to someone poking him in the arm.

"I swear to *God*, Tubbo, if you've woken me up *again*—" he muttered.

Only to come face to face with Ranboo. Tommy stared at the half-albino Enderian, suddenly wide awake. Ranboo blinked at him, one green eye and one red.

"I know you," Ranboo said.

"Yes," he answered, glancing nearby to see if anyone was convening near them. The most proximal crewmates were two tables down—the one called Bad and a blue-haired Merling were in a—lover's affair? Argument?—*disagreement*, waving their hands loudly and making exclamations. "You do. Ranboo."

Ranboo swallowed. "I remember you a bit, I think."

"You'd better. I'm super cool."

"Purpled told me—um, pieces," Ranboo said cautiously, looking slightly overwhelmed as he shifted in his chair. Tommy reminded himself that Ranboo didn't *know* him, not anymore, and this was not the same Enderian that he had shared jokes under a blood-red sky in fields of golden grass.

This one did not remember, and the other remembered very little at all. Tommy swallowed, suddenly feeling sick. Oh God, Ranboo didn't remember him except second-handed.

Oh God, Purpled hated him from walking away. For seeking revenge. He never said it, but Tommy *knew* that the Human held some resentment for him leaving and getting captured, and breaking his—promise. Perhaps it was a childish one, but sometimes Tommy stared at his pinky and wondered if that pinky promise was broken.

"I promise I'll come back, okay?"

"Pinky swear?"

He grins, wide and thin, and staring into dull magenta eyes. "Always," he says. "I'll come back alive."

To the world, he breaks that promise. To himself, he sits, and he stares, and he cries.

"Pinky swear," Ranboo muttered, tilting his head and shaking his half-white, half-black hair. "You promised to come back." Tommy knew that he was trying to remember—he did that a lot until the end.

He grinned half-heartedly. "Yeah. And I did, didn't I?"

"You're late," Ranboo said reproachfully. "It's been—um—years."

"Three," he said. "And I'm Tommy Innes. I arrive precisely when I mean to."

"I didn't know you've read the Lord of the Rings!" Tubbo said delightedly, and Tommy jumped, glancing at Ranboo, who looked slightly confused.

"How much of that did you hear?" he asked nervously.

"Uh, just the quote. Why?"

"No reason," he said hurriedly. "As for—uh, reading. Yeah, I dabble. A bit. The prison had a library."

"It did?" Tubbo said. "That's pretty cool."

"They also killed people in there, Tubbo," Ranboo reminded the C.O.O. helpfully.

"Right," Tubbo said, as Tommy poked at some floating...grey things in the milk in front of him. It had raspberries and blueberries and some brown sugar on top. "That's less good."

"Yeah, it had the classics," Tommy said after a moment. "But they wouldn't give us datapads, so they were in Old Terran format. Books."

Tubbo whistled. "Damn, that's *sick*."

"I—that's—what?" Tommy asked, choking on a mouthful of whatever-the-fuck-the-breakfast was because it was from *sweet* hell and stung his mouth from the pure sugariness.

Ranboo rolled his eyes. "Slang. It means cool."

God, if he wasn't going to have an aneurysm from golden apples, he was going to have an aneurysm from the breakfast and Tubbo. Mostly Tubbo.

"Can I just have golden apples?" he asked Tubbo.

"No," the boy said.

"Please?" he said. "Just one?"

"Um, nurse sitting right here," Ranboo said. "Hello? Maybe don't say that in front of a medical officer whose superior is trying to wean you off of drugs?"

He hesitated. "Right. How about—you know, you just forget that I said that?" He paused. "Literally?"

Tubbo choked on his—cereal? Death soup?—breakfast? "*What.*"

"It's a joke," Tommy deadpanned.

"Um..." Ranboo said.

Tommy stabbed his spoon in the Enderian's direction. "You're not laughing. It's a joke. Laugh."

And so that was how he ended up in the medbay for the second time under twenty-four hours, trying not to scream as Lani shined a light in his eyes.

"Lani, I think he's going to tear your eyes out," Ranboo said, from where he was twiddling his thumbs. Tommy had never seen a person before Ranboo *and* after Ranboo that had *ever* quite

literally twiddled their thumbs.

"I can take it," Tubbo's sister said dismissively.

"No, you can't," Ranboo replied nervously.

Tommy pointed a finger at him, unable to give him a death-stare because of the bright light on his face. "I'm not done with you. How *dare* you fucking report me to—that—hey, Niki!"

"Hello, Tommy!" Niki said brightly as she entered the medbay, a hypospray in her hand. Tommy batted Lani's hand away from his eye and scooted away quickly.

"Oh, no, no, no, get that *thing* away from me, I will *not* be subjected to this—OUCH, WHAT THE FUCK!"

Niki stepped away, looking vaguely amused as she put the hypospray down on a sterilized tray. "You are aware that you're going to have to come back here for about a week for more of them?"

He gaped at her, rubbing at his neck. "What?"

"Up until we get to Terra," the Merling explained with a smile that Tommy was *sure* was filled with malice and not the warm smile she gave others. "Then I'll hand you off to a medical officer that can continue your treatment if you're not already better—which you should be, but if you aren't I'm not taking any chances."

"I'm fine," he said through gritted teeth.

"You're recovering from an addiction," she corrected. Tommy huffed, blowing a strand of his hair out of his eyes. "Next week, I'm sending you to Bad."

"I don't need to see a therapist."

Niki threw up her hands. "*Fine*. Be my guest. But you *are* going to get those hyposprays so we can remove the remnants of the golden apples from your bloodstream, or so help me; I will strap you down and force you to remain in medbay for the rest of your journey."

"I don't even *want* to go to Terra," he muttered.

"You're lucky Captain Philza is choosing to vouch for you," Niki said absently, and Tommy forced the wave of surprise down at that. Sure—maybe he'd expected, at most, Wilbur to vouch for him, and Purpled for sure—but Philza? The Captain?

He'd spoken, like, twelve words to him.

"See?" Tubbo said. "You can join Fleet school and join the crew in a few years!"

"Tubbo, it takes at least seven years to graduate," Niki said reproachfully. "Just because it took *you* three, and you enrolled at eleven and were top one percent of your class doesn't really mean anything. You had excellent schooling as a child and—well, not really supportive parents—but they signed off the papers for you to join the crew at fourteen."

Ranboo tentatively raised his hand. "I didn't even go to Fleet school. Nor did Purpled."

"Right, but that's because of your special circumstances," Niki said with a slight inclination of her smile as she gestures Lani through some tool movements—teaching and talking at the same time. "I don't think that Command would have been pleased to lose one of their top Medical Officers and Security Officers. They would have *definitely* left had Purpled been forced planetside." She sighed. "I'm glad that they weren't."

"What, you mean Ponk and Punz?" Tommy asked.

Niki nodded. "Yes. I'm sure you're aware they're Purpled's brothers. They—we—argued with Command about forcing them planetside. They were the—" She met Ranboo's eyes, the Enderian nodding slowly. "—survivors of the Red Planet's Genocide, if you weren't aware."

"I was," he said haltingly.

"Ah," Niki said. "Yes, well, they would have faced publicity because of that, and as kids, we didn't really want that."

Lani grinned. "Attachment," she said. "I was new to the ship because our parents...passed—" Her voice hitched slightly, but she continued on. "—but I got attached to Ranboo. He was interested in medicine, and I thought the condition he was in was...fascinating. No offense, Ranboo," she added as an afterthought.

The Enderian shrugged. "None taken," he said. "I found it pretty interesting myself, though we never really found out why my body has the reaction it does to non-Enderian foods. So I decided to stick around. And you're right, I don't like flashing cameras anyway."

"The paparazzi wanted to see you?" Tommy asked. He hadn't thought about that—he hadn't thought what he'd left them to when he'd gone for revenge; a sick Human and an amnesiac Enderian, neither of whom fully remembered the story.

Lani scoffed. "Oh, did they *ever*. The *L'manburg* was already an enigma because of me and Tubbo, you know, being kids and all that jazz, but then we got the temporary joke name *Orphanage*, and Mr. Techno got all mad."

"He doesn't like orphans," Niki said. Somehow that made Tommy let out a small choking laugh. "So that rumor was dispelled quickly. We had half the age requirements and twice as much to prove, though, but Captain Philza made it work."

"This ship wasn't new, but the crew was," Tubbo said, stretching and leaning against Ranboo like a cat. Tommy tilted his head at the form—Ranboo had to be twice as tall as Tubbo. "The old one died from mushroom spores."

"It wasn't mushroom spores; they were champignon—never mind," Niki sighed. "But yeah. It was a whole ordeal. We were patrolling sector seventy-four B—classic newbie flagship duties, not even near the border. But—then we got a distress call, and Command told us we were the closest...so we went for it."

The room was quieter now, and Tommy had a feeling he knew who had sent that distress call.

"By the time we reached Pogtopia," Niki said in a low whisper, her eyes solemn and sad. "Three thousand children were dead. There were other casualties—soldiers, guards, whatever. But all that mattered was that there were three thousand children dead. Had we arrived days earlier, we could have saved hundreds." She shook her head, her steady hands shaking from where they lay on her lap. "It was...a long few months. Purpled and Ranboo are all that remain." Tommy met Ranboo's eyes, the Enderian blinking at him questioningly, and Tommy shook his head. "The missions have been a bit easier since then, but none as hard. Ranboo and Purpled stuck to us like glue, and we haven't let go since."

"You're a kid; you can join!" Lani said.

"I'm not sure that's how joining a crew works," he told her absentmindedly, lost a bit in his memories.

Lani frowned. "I haven't finished Fleet school," she told him. "I gotta stay with Tubbo because our guardians are dead and now Niki and Eret are our official guardians, so I'll take a few courses on shore leave when we drop you off—probably a month or so, enough for a few classes—then boom, back to the ship."

"At this rate, you'll graduate in twelve years," Tubbo said dryly.

"Eh," Lani said. "I'm already basically part of the crew. *Technically*, I'm a cadet, but around here, I'm a junior nurse. Ranboo is a nurse as well, though he's a senior nurse. He never went to Fleet school, but he did complete his schooling, even if it was on an odd place." Ranboo winced slightly, and Tommy was reminded of a schoolhouse full of laughter and a boarding house with roommates.

"I graduated in three years," Tubbo grinned, meeting Tommy's eyes. "I dare you to do better."

Later, Tommy would find he took that dare to heart.

Chapter End Notes

haha, bet that wasn't the reunification you wanted.

Well, too bad, that's the only one you're getting. I'm not shitty at writing two people reuniting, don't worry. Wilbur was just surprised.

Suck it green boi, you left the parking brake on

YOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

SUCK IT, GREEN BOIIIIIIII

- Wilbur Soot

"Why is he on the bridge?" Wilbur demanded, making eye contact from his chair as Tubbo and Tommy walked aboard, Tubbo saluting Phil half-heartedly.

Tommy had a massive shit-eating grin on his face. "Well, it was either that, or leave me with Purpled and Ranboo," he said, glancing out the window. They appeared to be over a planet—fueling up, it seemed, and just getting ready to leave that morning.

He couldn't believe it had only been an hour and a half since Tubbo had woken him up. He'd stolen a wake-up hypospray from Niki when she hadn't been looking—Ranboo had fortunately turned a blind eye—and that had helped *loads*, but his eye was twitching, and his hands were tapping against his thigh.

Maybe he should have just drunk coffee.

Techno eyed him but returned to shifting through holograms of paperwork—doing what Philza didn't want to, probably—sipping from a mug of the good stuff every so often. Dream had his forehead leaning against his desk, resting his eyes as the bridge awaited the transmission that announced that their fuel receptors were satisfied.

Tubbo took his seat at the Operations desk, and Tommy was immediately astounded by the new holographic technology—his father had manufactured his alone in their fifteen-year voyage in space, but they'd mostly been cut-off from Command.

A voice cutting through the air made Tommy tear his gaze away from the equations and speed that Tubbo's fingers flew across his desk as he sorted through papers and trashed them or handed them off to Techno by sliding them across the air.

"Lieutenant Finn to Captain Philza," the man said, his voice ringing out clearly through the bridge. "The fuel cells are completely energized, sir. We're clear to leave."

"Thank you, mate," Phil said, a small smile that Finn—the Chief Engineer?—couldn't possibly see on his face. The transmission ended. "Dream? Get her moving."

"Huh?" Dream said, starting, his blonde hair messy and his eyes red. "Oh, yeah. Sure." Tommy watched with vivid interest as Dream's fingers moved across the controls, flicking switches and causing a slight hum—when listened closely to—to fill the air of the ship.

When he had first left the *H.M.S Fran*, he had been unable to sleep—not because of the *lack* of silence, but because of the silence *itself*. The humming of the ship had been a missing leg to him—much as the deaths of his family were. It was another thing missing, another puzzle piece that would never come home. He had slept fitfully for weeks in the prison until Chroma had picked him up.

On the Red Planet, he had been able to rest. At least...for a bit. Now, of course, he was back to not resting because of the experimentation.

"Maximum warp, Dream," Philza said, fortunately, interrupting Tommy from his dreary thoughts. "Punch it."

"Aye aye, captain," Dream said.

The ship didn't move.

"Have you disengaged the external inertial dampener?" Technoblade asked as if this were an everyday occurrence.

Dream glared at him. "Yes. Shut up."

"Wow, you're a shitty pilot," Tommy commented.

The blonde-haired helmsman rolled his eyes. "Fine, if it's so easy, *you* do it," he said.

"That sounds like a terrible idea," Tubbo commented.

Tommy smirked, walking over. "Watch and learn, idiot," he said.

"I swear to God, if he fucks up this ship..." Philza warned.

Yet...he didn't move. As if they were waiting for someone. They didn't move to stop him, and Dream left his seat so Tommy could read the labels.

"Clementine," he said clearly, crinkling his nose at the holographic controls that Dream had out.
"Change the driving mode to Alpha Male."

"What—" Techno started.

» **Of course, Tommy.** «

He watched with joy as Sam's code programmed into Clementine's interface took effect, changing the controls into red and white and yellow and interfacing them the way *he* liked it. Noises of surprise sounded out around the room as Tommy cracked his knuckles.

Now, this—this was like old times. This was like the *H.M.S Fran*, which was like his aunt and father were alive again next to him—teaching him the controls, one by one.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "This is a throwback." He tilted his head slightly, thinking about what the problem could be. "Clementine, what is the rotational axis of the flight dish?"

» **Ninety point three degrees, Tommy.** «

He tapped his chin thoughtfully, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to remember his father's words. "Make that eighty-nine point seven, please." A silence. Tommy twisted his spinny chair around to stare at Tubbo. "Ahem. Aren't you the Operations Chief person?"

"Um..." Tubbo said, staring at him with big brown eyes.

He snapped his fingers. "Get to it, *Chief Operations Officer*." Tubbo gulped and nodded, turning and tapping his fingers across his desk furiously. "Stupid idiot fuelers," Tommy muttered. "Must have knocked the disk off course."

"Uh, Tommy?" Tubbo said. Tommy turned to look at him. "Um...disk is at eighty-nine point seven."

"Hold on a second!" Techno barked. "Are you sure he isn't going to *kill* us?"

"Isn't the optimal disk rotation ninety?" Dream asked, holding up a hand to stop Techno from moving over and potentially unseating Tommy.

"That's what the *manual* says," Tommy said, rolling his eyes as he scanned the positional accords. "My—uh, you guys know Puffy? Captain Puffy? I learned a few tricks from her. She says that the manual is batshit and to burn it in fire." He shrugged. "I read all the manuals on the ship, but not that one."

"You got lessons from *Puffy*?" Wilbur asked, sounding shocked.

"Yeah," he said, thinking about his aunt, and smiling as he remembered her kind lessons and warm hands around his. He'd never *flown* alone—he'd never flown alone before Tubbo, even—even *he* had been there to fly a fighter—but it was easy to take his lessons and apply them to situations, even if there was the absence of warmth from held hands. "Yo, Clementine, how many cores does this ship have?"

» **Nine, Tommy. The tenth was traded four missions ago to a group of colonists—**«

"Yeah, I don't care," he said, waving his hands. "Just curious. Nothing to do with flying."

Dream blinked at him with green eyes. "So...do you know the problem?"

He scoffed. "What am I, five? I solved it the minute I looked over your shoulder. I was just fixing your shit. Like your disk rotational axis. It would have bugged Puffy, so I stopped her from rolling over in her space grave." Audibly, Tubbo choked, and Wilbur looked appalled at his apathy.

People made dead family jokes all the time, though, right? It was a healthy coping mechanism! Or an unhealthy one. He wasn't sure and wasn't going to find out.

Philza cleared his throat. "If you don't mind telling the rest of the crew," he said, amusement clear in his voice. "What exactly was the problem?"

Tommy dismissed his controls, immediately missing the red holograms as he stepped away, tilting his head and smiling. "You forgot the parking brake."

Dream gaped at him. "There is *no* way—" He sat down and paused, coughing slightly as he flipped a switch, the lights on the desk turning green. "Ready for warp, captain."

Philza laughed, shaking his head. "Kids amaze me," he sighed.

"Not a kid," Tommy reminded him.

"Sure," Techno drawled.

"Punch it," Philza said as Tommy opened his mouth to argue with the annoying half-Piglin crewmember.

Dream pulled the lever, and Tommy watched with glimmering eyes as the stars stretched into lines of pure light, and they entered warp speed.

He shook his head, laughing to himself, feeling the looks upon the back of his head as he walked away, entering the elevator and inputting the codes that he'd memorized from Sapnap.

Perhaps he would find a way to get some golden apples from Karl. No, Niki would be mad. And then he'd have to endure more needles from hyposprays. Maybe he'd get some chocolate.

Yeah, chocolate sounded good.

Tommy was still smiling when the doors shut on the dumbstruck faces of the bridge crew.

After sitting in his room and giving Clementine strict orders to tell everyone who tried to enter that he wasn't here for about four hours, Tommy grew bored. And hungry. Clearly, Tubbo had been ordered to be his babysitter all day—but he'd felt the ship's engines drop out of warp—they shouldn't have; they should have been in warp until they reached Terra.

Something had happened, but it wasn't anything bad by the lack of red alerts and alarms. Tommy got the inkling of a feeling that they were making another stop—not for fueling—at another planet. Perhaps for a diplomatic mission. Unfortunately, despite having some give since he was the son of Clementine's creator, he wasn't actually a crew member and didn't have any clearance above civilian. Which sucked, but it was whatever.

Besides, he hated diplomatic missions.

"Hey, Clementine?" he asked, after watching the ball he'd been throwing against the wall roll under the table across the room.

» **Yes, Tommy?** «

"Where's Tubbo?"

» **As Alpha Shift has just ended, the Chief Operations Officer is currently in the gym with Captain Philza and Commander Techno. Lieutenant Soot—** «

He waved her off, standing up and stretching. "I don't give a fuck about Wilbur," he said.

» **That is untrue, Tommy.** «

He snorted. "Yeah, whatever. How do I get to the gym?"

» It is the place that the gym has always been on for flagships, Tommy. Nothing has much changed. «

Tommy sighed, running a hand through his hair and debating grabbing a pair of scissors and chopping through his overgrown locks. Eventually deciding against it, he stalked to the door and unlocked it with a few deft taps of the button.

While he didn't exactly have the entire ship's blueprints memorized anymore, Tommy *did* know where the gym was.

Though it was less of a gym and more of a...stadium.

"Hey, Tommy," Ranboo greeted him as he rounded a corner, nearly bumping into the tall Enderian. "Where have you been for the past few hours? The bridge was in an uproar." He tilted his head. "Tubbo told me what happened."

Tommy grimaced. Ranboo was a confusing element to his life—he was a survivor of the Red Planet's Genocide, yet he didn't remember a thing of that planet—or his life before that. So it was odd, *knowing* him...and yet not. It was an enigma he had yet to figure out.

And he hated not knowing things. Some might call it obsessive.

Tommy liked to call it being prepared. Purpled was the same way, except worse.

So...yeah. Ranboo was Ranboo, and Tommy had saved him, and Tommy *knew* him—had spent his best and worst moments, had shared classes and jokes that Ranboo would never remember.

Perhaps they could be friends again. Technically—they were. But both of them danced around a line of confusion—because Tommy wouldn't talk about it, Ranboo didn't know, and Purpled was just cross all the time. Cross at Tommy for not *sharing*, furious at the world for this mess, and bitter at his dreams for being nightmares.

"I was in my room," Tommy admitted after a moment, trying not to connect the dots between a skinny and malnourished Enderian who cried in his hands as his mind failed him and the person that stood in front of him—an Ensign to a ship that was full of other kids and brilliant people.

Ranboo frowned. "Huh. Wilbur tried to find you to get you to explain, but Clementine said you weren't there."

"Clementine's on my side," he said with a slight grin.

"...don't I outrank you?"

Tommy was reminded that Ranboo didn't *know* that he was Captain Sam's son and Captain Puffy's nephew—Purpled, bless him, hadn't told a soul.

Though that may have been out of bitterness and not because Purpled had wanted to keep Tommy's secret.

"Yeah, *Ensign*," he said. "Seeing as my ship's gone, my rank no longer stands." Ranboo winced. "Fortunately, Clementine understands privacy."

Ranboo sighed. "I'll go inform the bridge that you didn't jump ship or rig the engine to blow up." Ranboo hesitated. "Can you even do that?"

Tommy grinned. It was an answer—and it wasn't a verbal one, though it made Ranboo pale slightly.

He'd forgotten how gullible the Enderian was. Some things never changed.

Many things did.

» Ensign Ranboo is being dramatic, Tommy. Had you attempted to endanger the crew in any way or leave the ship in the middle of warp, I would have locked down the sector and informed the bridge of your attempt. «

He raised an eyebrow. "That wounds me, Clementine, that you think I wouldn't succeed."

» If my estimation of your character remains correct, then I do not think that you would try any of that. «

"You lied to me," Ranboo accused Clementine, glancing at the nearest camera, his eyebrows—one black, one white—furrowing slightly to convey his dismay.

» I did nothing of the sort, Ranboo. Nor did I say that Tommy was not in his room. I did not answer your question as to whether he was in there or not—as living beings do, you merely jumped to your own conclusions. «

Ranboo shook his head, a slight grin coming to his face. "Sneaky AI's." Clementine didn't respond to his jab. "Oh, well. See you later, Tommy!" He dodged around the Avian, jogging down the rest of the hallway. Tommy watched him turn the corner with a sigh.

"Really?" he muttered. "The entire ship and I bump into him?"

» It was my estimation that you two, despite Ensign Ranboo's amnesia, that you two still remain friends, as you are with Quartermaster Purpled. «

He threw up his hands as he continued walking down the white hallways, turning corners like he knew the blueprints from the back of his hand.

Which, of course, he very nearly did.

"I don't know, Clementine," he grumbled. "It's like we know each other, but we don't at the same time. It's really awkward. He doesn't remember me, but Purpled and I know we should, and I don't *want* to remember what happened."

» Perhaps you should do what the Chief Civilians Officer calls talking things out. «

He raised an eyebrow. "That guy sounds like a bitch."

» Tubbo would not appreciate the title you are giving his guardian. «

Tommy snorted. Clementine almost sounded reproachful. Also—Tubbo's guardian as the Chief Civilians Officer? What had his name been? Eric? Erect? He couldn't quite remember, and that annoyed him. Whatever. It didn't matter. "Think of another alternative, Clementine," he muttered. "*Talking it out* isn't going to work."

"Talking about what?" Wilbur asked curiously.

Tommy yelped. "You—what the fuck?"

"I didn't go Phantom-form," Wilbur told him, as if knowing what he was going to ask. "I just caught sight of you while heading to the gym."

"Oh hey, that's where I'm going too!" he said.

"Can I join you on your walk?"

"No, bitch," he said.

» **Tommy.** «

He sighed. "Fine, Wil-bitch."

"That's a terrible nickname," Wilbur told him, not even sounding annoyed—more amused, putting his hands at the small of his back. What a fucking forward *prick*. "I've heard worse from better people."

He snarled angrily, kicking at the nearest wall and missing. Wilbur watched him with slight amusement, and Tommy really wanted to strangle him.

"You know," Wilbur said. "I don't get why you hate me."

"I don't hate you," he corrected the older boy. "You're an insufferable idiot, but I hate very few people."

"Yet you saved my life," the Phantom noted softly. "And knew of the alleged return of Chroma." He hesitated. "Command already knew."

Tommy's head whipped around to stare at Wilbur, who had a somber look about him. "*What?*"

"Yeah," Wilbur sighed, rubbing his forehead. "There have been more sightings. More rumors. Yours greatly confirms it, though, because you're the sole survivor of the *H.M.S Fran*."

"And—why didn't they tell the survivors of the Red Planet?" he demanded.

"I don't know either," Wilbur hissed.

"They're probably going to be targeted!" Tommy retorted. "They're the only ones that know the truth about the Red Planet and Pogtopia!" He gestured widely with his hands, and Wilbur stepped out of the way neatly to avoid being whacked in the face. "If they die, then nobody knows!" Tommy paused. "Right?"

"Yeah, that's correct," Wilbur sighed. "They gave statements to Command via comm calls, but nothing more—and that was years ago. They couldn't be ordered to give any official stories because Eret stepped in and claimed mental health issues—first with Ranboo, because, you know, amnesia—and then with Purpled, because it might be damaging and bring traumatic flashbacks. Command backed off for a bit, but when Purpled turns eighteen, they'll start harassing us until he tells."

Tommy ticked off a few fingers, counting the days in his head. "That's in...eight months? No, seven."

Wilbur tilted his head. "Huh. You know his birthday." Tommy blinked at him. "But yes. He hasn't told a soul, not even his brothers. We know a bit, but not a lot. I believe him when he says that he doesn't remember, only what the leader of the Children's Rebellion told him when he was sick."

Tommy frowned. He hadn't thought of himself as a leader...Purpled and Ranboo had been too sick to listen anyway, and the other three had just...followed him and made their decisions based on the shitty plans he'd created.

Perhaps, had they been better, he could have saved them. Perhaps *they* could be there; the six of them—like the six stars upon the flag, together, smiling.

Three will never show their faces above ground again. One does not remember, and still another lies angry, unwilling to talk to anyone.

The last is stubborn. He refuses to admit what happened—he blames himself, even though he was child, and there was close to nothing he could have done. Still, he keeps his lost heart inside, and he laughs, and he covers up the pain that hides behind his eyes.

Tommy closed his eyes and hid the world behind it. *His* world, his familys'. He closed his eyes, and he smiled, and he laughed, and he made stupid jokes, and everything was fine. At night he curled up like Purpled, awash with the sounds of gunfire and eyes that no longer see this plane of existence—*because of him*. Because of him. It was his fault. Everything was his fault. "Leader," he murmured. Is that what he was? A leader to death, maybe.

Wilbur mistook Tommy's words for a question and nodded. "Yes, they had a leader. He went missing—he wasn't...gone with the rest of them." That audible silence in the middle of Wilbur's sentence is louder than his voice. "But...he's dead now. He left, and we never found him. Chroma killed him."

So confident, Tommy thought.

And yet...what were they supposed to think? That he had been alive—dwelling in a prison—after attempting to chase down an Avian that had already murdered three thousand, two hundred, and seventy other children? What were they supposed to *think*—he was another nameless boy that Purpled had not specified, another face to join the bodies. Just another person, another name lost to history.

He had seen the murals in the halls, painted on the ships' walls to commemorate one of the first missions the *L'manburg* had ever flown. Also arguably the worst mission in Galactic Rebellion history, in his opinion—if the sick looks on Wilbur and Techno and Phil's faces said anything. He had seen the name wall, and he knew that his fake name—Tomathy David—was on there somewhere. Or perhaps Purpled had quietly erased it, and nobody had bothered to count the names.

He had felt sick when he had gazed upon that wall and seen a name that had made him turn on his heels and walk away. He could not do this. He wasn't strong enough.

He had never been strong enough.

"Was it difficult?" he asked.

"What?" Wilbur asked him distractedly.

"To see the videos," he said.

"Of...?"

"The executions."

Wilbur's head whipped around to stare at him, blinking with white light as he fought to control his Phantom form. "You've *seen* those?"

And—Tommy had slipped up. He had wondered, and he had made a mistake, and so now he had to lie. "Yeah. The Red Planet was in neutral space, remember? The Arachnids got ahold of a copy and forced us to watch." He swallowed, the deceit heaving in his stomach. "It wasn't pretty."

"No," Wilbur said, curiousness and disbelief written all over his face. "It wasn't."

He stands there in the crowd—fifty of them left, with Ranboo and Purpled in the caves, and he sees [REDACTED] with the gun to their head, and their chin held high. [REDACTED_2] 's wings are shackled to the ground, and [REDACTED_3] sheds tears of regret and resilience.

Tommy does not have a gun. He has other people to protect. If he dies here, then Ranboo and Purpled fall. If he dies here, then there is nobody left for his other friends.

[REDACTED] catches his eye as the gun is put to their head. The crowd is silent, but there are no tears left to fall upon the dead and frozen ground of the famine. The children of Pogtopia look on with dark eyes—as their peers are murdered in front of them, and they can do nothing because they are children and have no power, no guns, no influence.

Tommy looks at [REDACTED] in their torn and dirty outfit, their telltale paint cans missing from her pocket. They are thin and gangly and far too pale—he can see the bones of their jaw and their collarbones poke too far out.

He moves to step forward, but [REDACTED_2] shakes their head at him, and someone—he does not know who, and he never learns—hauls him back as he cries, silent tears pouring down his face.

[REDACTED] raises their right hand and raises three fingers—their pointer, thumb, and middle finger.

The sign of the Children's Rebellion.

[REDACTED] smiles at him, cold and sad and full of anger.

And then Chroma calls the order, and they fall. Tommy's scream is only within him, but he is rooted to the spot as he is forced to watch as the phasers fire and his friends die. He is forced to watch with someone's arm around his stomach, so he does not rush off and do something stupid. A sob rises in his chest as [REDACTED_2]'s wings go limp, their eyes staring into nothingness, as [REDACTED_3]'s green orbs close one last time, their hands still raised in rebellion.

He didn't want to see those videos. He had *never* seen those videos—he didn't need to. The memories, first-hand, lie within him forever. As much as he wished for them to be gone—he did not want to *forget*. He was jealous and envious of Ranboo for his inability to remember—forever to only know, second-hand—and yet...he would never forget them. He was saddened that Ranboo would never remember.

A mix of emotions, his fucking ass.

"They were only children," Wilbur said. "Only children."

Tommy knew that. Some part of him deep inside knew that he was still a child, that he should *tell* someone—that Purpled had every right to betray his trust and spill his secret. And yet—at the same time—he didn't want the media's attention and the crew on him.

He wanted to leave and never look back. He wanted to—selfishly—wave goodbye and leave the problems to people who did not have nightmares and flashbacks and cried when nobody was looking. He wanted to turn his back and run.

And yet—

"The past always catches up with you. Might as well rip off the band-aid now."

He was not strong enough. Not now, and not ever.

I'm fast as fuckkk boiiii—oh shit, I can't breathe

*Experience is a hard teacher
because she gives the test first,
the lesson afterward.*

- Vernon Law

The gym looked different from the one that had been aboard the *H.M.S Fran*. Tommy knew that, and he missed *his* gym—but at the same time, he was glad he could separate this one from that, glad of the dark red track that ran around a soccer field and the large lights. The soccer field was unused—ropes hung from the ceiling and a large cushion lay underneath. The field seemed to be in use from a large gymnastics routine set-up—Tommy wasn't quite sure—because when he and Wilbur entered, Tubbo stopped jumping on the trampoline, his hair sticking to his forehead as he stepped out. Techno and Phil were doing something with swords—an archaic set of tools, but Tommy supposed it managed for a workout.

"Hey, Wilbur!" Tubbo greeted, grinning widely, like usual. "Come to work out?"

"Not really," Wilbur said with a slight twist of his lips. "It's about the new...mission details." He glanced at Tommy meaningfully.

Philza scoffed, his sword resting in front of him, wooden tip planted in the ground, his wings moving slightly as he turned. Techno looked more at ease, his Piglin ears twitching the only show that he was exhausted in the slightest. "Come on, mate, it's just a diplomacy meeting to reassure the colony that the Galactic Rebellion really does care."

"Do they?" Tommy asked.

"No," Technoblade said. Philza nudged him, and Wilbur rolled his eyes. "What? I'm just sayin'. Those guys are *assholes*."

"Oh, they must be Piglins, then."

"Heh? No! They're descendants of Terrans." Techno's ears twitched irritably. "Bunch of simple-minded bastards, the lot of 'em."

"You can't say that," Tubbo said diplomatically.

Wilbur snorted. "They *are* a bunch of backward people," he said. "But the outposts there are useful 'cause it borders neutral space. As much as we dislike the inhabitants—"

"I hate them," Techno said.

"—we gotta assure them that we don't hate them," Wilbur continued, voice rising over the half-Piglin's in a feeble attempt to override them.

Tubbo crossed his arms. "We have to *pretend* to," he said. "Remember what happened last time?"

"Yeah, you got married to Ranboo," Philza snorted.

Tommy choked. "I'm sorry, *what*?"

"Yeah," Tubbo sighed. "That's done now. I'm divorced." For some reason, he looked slightly wistful. "Kristin and I went down as ambassadors, and when they found out she was already married to Mr. Philza Minecraft over here—" the Captain dipped his head in recognition, a smile on his lips. "—they decided it would be a great idea to marry their princess off to me in an attempt at unifying our people." He rolled his eyes.

Tommy's eyes widened. "You're married?" he asked Philza.

"Yep."

"Damn, you're old."

"Wha—I'm not *old*!" Philza sputtered, and Wilbur snickered quietly.

"You're married," Tommy declared. "That means you're old."

"Tubbo is married too!"

"No," Tubbo said solemnly. "I'm divorced." He heaved a mournful sigh.

"Why do you sound sad about that?!" Tommy yelled. And why hadn't Purpled told him earlier?

Tubbo sighed again. "I just commed the person that I thought would go along with whatever I said after they said I was going to get married to this random girl."

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "You're telling me that you think Ranboo is susceptible to other people's words?" Tubbo sputtered indignantly. "Because you're absolutely right. He absolutely is."

"I can't even argue with that," Tubbo sighed. "Why are you here, Tommy?"

"I was bored, and the ball I was bouncing against the table rolled under the table, so I asked Clementine where you were," Tommy shrugged.

"Oh, you wanted to hang out with me?" Tubbo said, perking up.

He rolled his eyes, refusing to acknowledge the warm feeling inside him. "No, Ranboo was busy..." he trailed off. "Wait, Ranboo went to the bridge looking for you guys."

"Well," Wilbur said. "Dream is there. He can take the message if it's important."

"Why would you leave Dream there alone?" Techno groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. "He'll crash the ship."

"We're in warp, Techno," Phil said. "He can't do anything of that sort."

"It's Dream. He'll find a way."

"You're just salty because he beat you in fencing a few years back."

"I beat him a month ago, in front of *everyone*—!"

"Hey, Tommy," Tubbo said loudly, pointing over to the track. "Wanna race?"

As Wilbur gave them a curious cursory glance, Tommy blinked, and Philza and Technoblade paused in their mock argument. "W-what?"

"Race," Tubbo said. "It's when you—"

"I know what a race is," he said through gritted teeth. "Now? Here?"

"Well...yeah," Tubbo said.

"You do realize that I just came back from a prison literally *yesterday*, and I lived mostly in a solitary cell for multiple years in a row," he deadpanned.

"Yep!" Tubbo said brightly. "You think you're up for it?"

"I..." he trailed off. "Sure." He flinched slightly as Tubbo grabbed his hand and dragged him off to the starting line, Techno and Wilbur trailing behind at a light jog. Philza, fuck him, used his wings to land neatly at the end line. Tommy tilted his head and marveled at the dark feathers as they cast a shadow over his head for a brief second.

"Just a hundred yards," Tubbo told him.

"Why are you doing this, again?" Techno asked, his ears flicking and his red eyes narrowing in on Tommy—though Tommy thought it was interest, not anger.

"I asked Ponk, 'cause he's in charge of species' medical records," Tubbo said, as Tommy bent down to touch his feet and stretched. "It had very little, compared to the other species, but it said that Avians were naturally faster. I wanted to test that."

"It only said that because I *told* you guys that," Tommy pointed out.

Tubbo tilted his head. "Oh, yeah."

He'd done this a million times before in a million different situations. He'd done this in another gym as his father instructed him on the Avian running ways—in what *he* could do, just as Tubbo could use a fourth-dimensional space and Philza could fly, and Wilbur could go into Phantom-form, and Technoblade was naturally stronger.

"I appreciate that I'm a lab rat," he said, stretching his thighs by jogging in place for a bit. Tubbo smirked at him.

"Tubbo's pretty fast," Wilbur said, more a warning than a mention of fact.

"I used to be as well," he said.

"Used to?" Techno questioned.

"Yeah, I got some muscle atrophy in prison," he said with a slight shrug, squinting at the line that Philza stood at, a hundred yards away. "Starvation and drug abuse."

"Drug abuse?" Wilbur said, his voice slightly higher than average.

"Golden apples," Tubbo explained, and Wilbur relaxed slightly, though his eyes were still wide.

"Hey, kid—" Tommy glared at Techno, who didn't look mollified in the slightest. "—Tubbo can't fight worth anything, so we got him into running. He was on varsity track for all his three years at Fleet school."

"Good," Tommy said. "I like a challenge."

Techno narrowed his eyes. "You're not going to win," he said. "His record is ten point eight seconds."

Tommy had to visibly keep his face straight at that.

He was an Avian. They were considered the weakest species known to the galaxy—but they had their secrets, and they were *his*, now. The Avians had kept their secrets well.

"Count us down," he drawled, crouching down, so his hands touched the dirt. Tubbo mirrored his position, a smile of suspense on his face.

"Are you sure about this?" Techno asked him. "If you go too fast, you could hurt yourself—"

"Nice that you care," he said with a smirk.

"No, I don't want you using up precious medical resources that could be used on actual crewmates," Techno said. Tommy blinked—he supposed he'd walked right into that one. But he'd *met* people who hated him, who didn't *give* one fuck about him—Techno was not one of those people. He knew that, and so he grinned and saluted the half-Piglin sharply.

"Don't worry," Tubbo said. "We're only doing a hundred yards for a reason. If I really wanted to challenge him, we'd do four hundred. Maybe eight hundred, someday." He cocked his head. "If you can keep up."

Tommy snickered. "I'm an Avian."

"Yeah, you're naturally faster, or some shit," Wilbur said. "But Tubbo's been running for years."

So have I, Tommy thought dryly. *Though perhaps it isn't the exact same type of running that he's been doing*. He didn't say that out loud, though. He never could. "Hey, let's make a bet."

"Hmm?" Tubbo said.

"If I win, I want to go down with the landing party," he said—because...because he wanted to see grass again. He wanted to see the sky, to touch water, to feel *gravity*, natural gravity—to touch dirt and rocks and sand and feel the sunlight upon his skin and *laugh* like he had with his family.

"Woah, woah," Wilbur said. "No way we're letting a *civilian*—"

"Relax, Wil," Techno said. "He won't win." He hesitated. "And on some off chance he does, then we can just assign him to be a cadet-in-training."

"You can do that?" Tommy asked.

"Sure," Techno said. "But if that happens, it means that you're *definitely* going to have to go to Fleet school because we're enrolling you."

Tommy sighed. Was it worth it—to see trees again? To see green—or whatever color the planet was? To look up and see the star—the sun—closest to them and bask in its warmth?

"Also, if you lose, I'm making you scour the cafeteria."

Yes, he decided. Yes, it was.

"Okay."

"This is a terrible idea," Wilbur groaned.

Yes, Tommy thought again. *Yes, it is. For you.*

"On your mark," the Phantom said, sounding slightly resigned. Tommy closed his eyes as he readied his feet, steadying his breathing. Breathe. In and out. Slowly. *Like your dad said to.* Concentrate.

Feel.

"Get set."

He raised himself higher.

"Damn, you've done track?" Tubbo grumbled slightly.

"I was born to run," he said simply.

And—it was true. Avians *were* born to run, to feel the open air and wind, and glide and run. He was glad of the small furrow line that appeared between Tubbo's brown eyebrows—glad at the seed of doubt that was planted.

"GO!"

Tommy felt the smirk appear on his face as Wilbur shouted that word, and he opened his eyes, pushed off the ground—pushed off the *air*—and ran.

Because while Elytrians were born to fly, Avians were born to run.

While Phantoms could change the particles that made themselves up—manipulate the atoms so that they could pass through solids at *precisely* the right frequency to pass through the masses that would otherwise be impassible—Avians could, biologically, manipulate the air particles around them.

His father had explained it to him when he was younger. It had been, from ancient Terran texts, some guy named Newton's first law in motion.

An object in motion stays in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an unbalanced force.

Take the ball in his room that Tommy had thrown, for example. It stopped moving because of the solid wall—but even if the wall hadn't been there, it would have been stopped anyway, drawn to fall by the pure force known as gravity. Avians, like himself—though it was *just* himself, now, and that hurt—could manipulate forces like gravity using the air molecules around them and parting them, much like parting milk with a spoon in cereal. Only temporarily, and only around him—but the air moved, and that made all the difference.

When running, people were slower because of the molecules that sat between them and their destination—namely, air. As they ran, their body pushed the molecules out of the way, though the molecules pushed back—called *drag*, which was caused by friction and differences in air pressure. The faster they moved, the more they needed to fight to push against the molecules—the more muscular they needed to be—and the more they pushed back.

Tommy felt the air around him and bent it so that it would not push around him—centimeters, millimeters, in front of him—smaller than that, but the molecules did not push, and so he *flew* in only the way that Avians could.

Not literally.

It was over in seconds.

Nine point eight five seconds, to be precise.

Tommy turned around and grinned widely, stopping on the white line and turning, taking one step back to step over the finish line, taking great pride in the flabbergasted look on Philza's face and Tubbo's astounded one—before he remembered the reason that Sam had hated how much he had run.

Right, because when he pushed the air molecules away, that included in front of his face.

Which meant no air flow...

"Shit," he said—and promptly blacked out.

He awoke to a hypospray injecting to his neck and sat up with a yell, blinking at the too-bright lights and the frantic medical officers that ran around in the room around him. He ripped off the respiratory mask—was that a tube running down his throat?—and took a gulp of fresh air, his lungs finally working on their own—because he, in his stupidity, had forgotten the first rule of Avians when running.

Don't forget to breathe.

Believe it or not, they had done that a lot. The professionals had learned how to let a small trickle of air into their lungs, but Tommy was far from a professional. Unfortunately.

In his weariness, he realized that it was Niki that had injected another one of her fucking hyposprays into his neck, and he did his best to glare at her as black spots danced in front of her eyes.

"He's breathing on his own," an unknown voice said with relief. Tommy glanced over to see a bronze-skinned man with short-cropped black hair.

"Oh, thank goodness," Ranboo groaned, sitting down heavily on the next bed over, looking exhausted.

Niki put a hand on his chest, and he allowed her to push him back onto his back, though only because he still saw colorful spots that really shouldn't be there, and his lungs were still heaving with the effort. His heart *really* hurt.

"You scared us, Tommy," she said and then raised a small black communicator to her lips and tapped something. "We got him stabilized." She glanced over at Lani, who looked white and pale, her hands shaking. "Lani, can you mark the time?"

"Yes," the girl said slowly, though Tommy got the inkling that was more for her benefit than the actual medical records. Something to do to stop her from shaking. "Right. 2138, time of stabilization." She glanced up, brown eyes meeting his. "Patient can breathe on his own." Tommy frowned. Wow, his father would be so mad at him. That was a whole disaster. Had he locked his breathing the entire time?

Whoops.

"It's 2138?" he said distractedly, his words halting and his lips chapped.

"You were out for nearly four and a half hours," Niki said tightly, her eyes filled with worry. "It was...intense after Philza came in here, and then Tubbo was here demanding to know, and Techno

and Wilbur—" She cut herself off. "We had to kick them out. They're locked out, as of now." She smirked. "Medical emergency, I outrank the captain."

"That's pretty cool," he admitted.

"This is Ponk," she said, pointing at the unknown occupant of the room. "Medical officer." Ponk—Purpled's brother—waved at him.

He blinked at the four of them. "What-what happened?"

"You tell us," Niki said. "They were shouting too much, but I think it has something to do with you being an Avian—at least, that's what I picked up before I kicked them out."

"Yeah," he said warily. Besides—whose secret was he leaking? He was very nearly the only Avian left. And he didn't really give a fuck about the other Avian, so... "Biology." Niki raised an eyebrow, and Tommy sighed.

The door slid open, and Tubbo tumbled in, a screwdriver and datapad in hand, looking slightly frazzled and like a deer caught in headlights as he scrambled to his feet.

» I'm sorry for the interruption, Lieutenant Nihachu, but he was attempting to hack into the mainframe, and as I do not want lingering damage to the code of this ship with his name written on it, and the medical emergency was over, I thought it best to open the door. «

Niki sighed. "It's fine, Clementine," she said warily.

Tubbo scrambled to his feet. "TOMMY!" he shouted. Tommy winced at the loud noise in his ears. "Oops, sorry. But you're not dead!"

"Clearly," he said.

"Right," Techno said, appearing in the doorway as Tubbo sat down next to his sister, his presence obviously calming the younger girl. "I'm interested in knowin' what the hell that little theatrical performance was."

"I cannot believe you rigged it so I couldn't walk through the door," Wilbur grumbled, pushing past the First Officer and marching over and waving a finger at Niki, his gaze just barely resting on Tommy.

Niki arched an eyebrow. "It was Dream's manufacture."

"That meddling *bastard*—" Niki glared at him, and Wilbur shut up, turning on Tommy. "And you, you fucking gremlin child!" Tommy would have been annoyed, but the tone in Wilbur's voice that leaked through showed his nervousness and worry. "What the *hell* was that?"

The medbay was silent as Tommy clasped his hands tried to find an answer. "It..." he trailed off finally. "I...um...I'm an Avian."

"That's not an answer," Wilbur said, jabbing a finger at his chest.

"It's...a bit like a Phantom," Tommy said, trying to find the correct words. "You can manipulate the molecules of your own body so they can pass through solids, right?" Wilbur nodded wordlessly, and Tubbo straightened up, understanding dawning in his brown eyes. The rest of them looked confused. "Right, well, Avians are similar—except with outside molecules. You know about drag, right?"

"We all went to school, kid," Techno drawled.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, Avians can manipulate the air molecules so that the force—" He pushed his hands together to show this and then released one of them, so his left hand continued in its rightward motion. "—doesn't exist."

"Except that also restricts your airflow," Tubbo said. "That's cool!" Everyone turned to look at him, and he shrunk, mollified. "...and really dangerous."

"Right," Tommy nodded. "Because I was shut up in the prison, I sort of forgot about that." He grimaced. "Basically, I forgot to breathe, and so my body shut down."

"Like Phantoms," Wilbur said, snapping his fingers. "It's why we don't teach our youngsters how to go into Phantom-form because they get overconfident and then die in solid objects from lack of air."

Tommy shuddered. "Please don't put that picture in my head," he frowned. "But yes, essentially. My body went into shutdown mode, and so my unconscious mind just never stopped my biology from obstructing the airflow."

There was silence.

"That's extremely dangerous," Niki said warily.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, it is."

"So that's why the respirator didn't work," Ranboo breathed out.

"Right, because pumping air wouldn't work," Tommy nodded. "You'd have to breach that small area that I was pushing away the molecules unconsciously."

"Which is why mouth-to-mouth resuscitation worked at first," Niki said, understanding filling her. "Because it crossed that line."

Tommy brought a horrified hand to his mouth. "Someone put their mouth to mine?"

"Would you rather have died?" Niki said, raising an eyebrow. "Ranboo did it."

"You cheated on me," Tubbo said playfully to the Enderian.

"Oh, God, not this again," Lani groaned.

"Right, anyway," Niki said. "The tube worked because it passed that line in a narrow space that overwhelmed your biology from working properly."

Tommy squinted. "How long was I not breathing for?"

"Five minutes and twenty-two seconds," Techno answered. Everyone turned to look at him, and the half-Piglin shrugged uncomfortably. "I counted the minutes that I finally got some peace and quiet."

"Oh, shut up," Tommy grumbled. No wonder his throat was sore—they'd shoved a breathing tube down it. "Can I go back to sleep now?"

"Sure," Niki said. "But not in your room. Here. In the medbay. Just in case it happens in your sleep."

He groaned. "That's not how it works."

"Unless you can give me a three-hundred-word book on Avian biology, as we have on all the other species, then you're not leaving."

"Kill me now."

"Fine with me," Techno said.

"Get out of my medbay, *Commander*," Niki hissed, and Techno left without another word. "What, you think I'm not talking to the rest of you? Ponk, I need you to record Tommy's monitoring before you turn in for the night. Clementine, I want you to alert the entire medical crew if he ceases to breathe for over two seconds in an unconscious state—"

"—and me," Tubbo interrupted, tossing Tommy a slight smile that he reciprocated after a second of hesitation.

"—and no, that doesn't include the bullshit of holding your breath. There are *cameras* in here; if he falls unconscious, sound the fucking alarm," Niki said in one breath, pausing to glare at Tubbo.

» **Of course, Lieutenant.** «

"Ensign Lani," Niki continued. "You are cleared from duty. You're off-shift by three hours anyway. Ponk, you too. Ranboo, Tubbo—" She saw their looks. "—if you're going to say, be over there." She gestured to two medical cots in the corner. "Don't bother him. Ranboo, you're in charge."

"Wha—but I outrank him!" Tubbo cried out as Lani leaped for the open door, turning to give Tommy one final look before she fled for bed, tiredness seeping from her body. Wilbur followed her out, pausing at the doorframe like she had, but Ponk didn't look back, too busy tapping at his datapad.

Niki gave a nasty smile. "Medical officers outrank the rest of the crew in the medbay. You know that as well as I do." Tubbo rolled his eyes, and Tommy was reminded of his father's recounts of his mother's bossiness in the medbay as well. His heart lurched. "Ranboo, if you have to pull rank to get Mr. Lieutenant from pulling something stupid, then I, as your senior medical officer, *order you to do so*." With that, the pink-haired Merling pulled off her gloves, all but threw them into the sterilizer, and slammed the door of the office that bordered the medbay shut.

"Damn," Tommy said in a low whisper as Tubbo sat down on one of the cots, and Ranboo remained in his. "She's scary."

Tubbo snorted. "She's a medical officer. They're all scary."

Tommy smiled. "My mom was a medical officer," he said, keeping his words simple carefully. He couldn't mention she was like Niki—she was a Lieutenant in her own damned right, and the C.M.O. "My father always said that she was scary too."

"She...died?" Ranboo asked carefully.

"Yes," Tommy said. "When I was three."

"I'm sorry," Tubbo offered.

"There's nothing you could have done," he said with a sad sort of smile, watching as the lights in the room dimmed—probably some contraption Niki had. "Don't be sorry. I loved my parents. I miss them," he added, after a moment. "A lot."

"Me too," Tubbo whispered. "Even though they didn't love me like they should have." Tommy felt a slight pang for the Shulker; his parents hadn't even cared for him like they had, allegedly, Lani.

"I don't remember my parents," Ranboo said, and Tommy nearly laughed for some reason. "But Purpled says that I said they died." Tommy heard the rustling of sheets as the Enderian shook his head from where he lay on the pillow. "I should miss them, but I don't. And I feel bad because of that."

"You can't miss someone you didn't know," Tommy told him. "I learned that lesson long ago. My father was never mad that I never missed mum. I was sad I never got to meet her, but I was never *missing* her like he was."

"Speaking of Purpled," Tubbo said. "He stopped by. Nearly had a heart attack when he found out what happened. He would have stayed longer, but he fell asleep, and I called Punz to take him to his room."

"It's nice to know he cares," Tommy said after a moment.

"Of course he does, Tommy," Ranboo said reproachfully, and Tommy knew that had more meaning that went unsaid because of the third person in the room that knew nothing about the secrets he was hiding. "Why wouldn't he?"

Because I'm the reason that everyone is dead, he thought, but he didn't say that—only rolled over and closed his eyes, ignoring the quiet murmurings of the other two occupants.

It's my fault.

Mine.

the fault in our...planet, fuck that shit. (in our stars)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*At your absolute best,
you still won't be good enough
for the wrong person.*

- Unknown

Tommy crossed his arms. "You promised," he said. "We pinky-swore."

"We didn't pinky-swear," Wilbur nearly snarled at him. Philza's wife, a nice black-haired woman named Kristin, blinked between them. "Kristin's an ambassador, and Tubbo's a Lieutenant. You're a citizen."

Tommy smirked. "*Ensign*, now," he corrected. "Philza got me enrolled in Fleet school online. He said I'm like Lani and Drista—whoever that is—except I'm under Dream."

"And why, exactly, would Kristin and Tubbo need a pilot?"

Tubbo cleared his throat from where he stood on the transporter. The Kitsune at the transporter control station—or, in fancy terms, the dematerialization and rematerialization automaton—looked mildly amused, his orange fox-like ears swiveling to better listen to the argument. "You know," Tubbo said. "We never know when we might need to make an escape."

"You'd have to steal a ship," Wilbur said.

"Never know when you might have to do that too," the Kitsune said.

Wilbur turned his pointed gaze upon him. "You're not helping, Fundy."

"I'm always helpful."

Tommy sighed. "Come on, please?" he said. "You *promised*."

"In my defense," Wilbur said slowly. "I didn't expect...that to happen. Congratulations, Tommy. You just shattered the record for the hundred-yard dash on the *L'manburg*." He threw up his hands. "Hell, with some months of practice—maybe even weeks—you could beat the cross-species record."

"I'm just that cool."

"No, you're an unknown package of biology that Niki and George really want to get their grubby hands on," Wilbur corrected. "Kristin...is it okay?"

"YES!" Tommy whooped, without waiting for the Human's answer.

Kristin gave him a fond smile. "It's a short meeting, not a three-day one, Wil," she said kindly. "Tubbo won't even talk. It's just me and a few delegates planning a date that Command will send a few official representatives to negotiate with."

"Aren't you an official representative?" Tommy asked through furrowed eyebrows as he stepped onto the transporter.

"Well, yes," she said. "But I'm a Fleet representative. I went to Fleet school—I learned all the things that you're going to learn plus negotiation, debate, and a few other things on my major." She smiled. "Which included learning how to fire a phaser and how to rig a ship to explode." Kristin turned back to Wilbur. "I know where we're beaming down to. There's a field a little way into the forest that they can stay in. Negotiations are boring for kids anyway."

"I wish I could see the consistency of the plant's atoms," Tubbo said dreamily. "Apparently, they're mostly purple due to the increased atmosphere—even though they're an M-class planet." He shook his head. "Blue skies, too. But purple instead of green...?"

"I thought you were the C.O.O?" Tommy asked him.

"Yeah, but I was almost a science major," Tubbo told him.

Wilbur coughed. "Don't do anything stupid," he told Tommy, though, by the extent that he eyed Tubbo, it was half at him as well.

Tommy saluted him smartly. "Yes, sir."

Kristin handed him a comm. "This is for contacting the different ship units," she explained, showing him the different buttons. "Though the auto-link is to Fundy."

Tommy nodded. "I had one back on the *H.M.S Fran*," he said, examining it. "Though it wasn't as advanced." He hooked it to the edge of his pants like Tubbo's was. Kristin's was in a bracelet around her wrist; a personal choice since she was wearing a lovely dress that didn't have anything around the waist that she could clip it to.

"Right," Fundy said, bringing his own communicator near his mouth and pressing the one that would bring him in contact with Command. He waited for a second for the link to be accepted. "Junior Lieutenant Fundy to Ensign Quackity."

» *You are cleared for transport, Lieutenant Fundy.* «

"Thank you, Quackity," Fundy said before signing off. "Three to beam down." He glanced up once more for confirmation, and the three of them gave short quick nods.

Tommy took a deep breath, readying himself for being on a planet for the first time in—how long had it been? Two years?

"Energizing," Fundy said, and Tommy got that fuzzy feeling as his body was turned to energy and beamed down onto Falir VI. Immediately his ears were filled with that of wildlife—birdsong, he thought amicably, as he looked up at the clouds that weren't mere illusions, were *natural*—at the soil beneath his boots and the warm midday sun that shone upon him. The air felt...fresh, instead of the recycled stale one, and *that* he had forgotten.

They stood among ancient rock pillars on a stone dais, and when Tommy squinted, he could see century-old carvings in the stone, some worn away with age or lack of care. Standing about twenty yards away, three representatives—two women and one man—with bronze skin and odd tattoos beneath their eyes that had to be a specific custom that Tommy didn't understand stood waiting for them.

Kristin turned and smiled at them. "You two can go off. Just not too far—the Falirs don't like that. Don't burn the forest down."

"It's purple," Tubbo said reverently.

"Nerd," Tommy responded.

Tubbo huffed. "Race you to the nearest tree," he said, pointing out a yellow trunk that had violet leaves. He was off before Tommy could agree.

"I was told that you shouldn't be doing that," Kristin said when Tommy made to follow him.

His communicator beeped, and Tommy opened the messaging part to see one in all caps from a certain Lieutenant.

Nihachu (Niki)

↳ *NO EXERCISING*

I MEAN IT

I WILL INJECT YOU WITH SO MANY HYPOSPRAYS

YOU WON'T WAKE UP UNTIL WE GET TO EARTH

Tommy

↳ *yeah yeah*

Tommy *walked* after Tubbo, deciding to listen to the Lieutenant, who, though he doubted was listening, wasn't inclined to test whether she kept tabs on him. Kristin walked forward to meet the delegates, her mouth pouring out meaningless greetings that they would return after she finished.

"Planetary classification seems sound," Tubbo was muttering as he reached the boy, who was picking at the bark from the trunk of the yellow tree. He had a scanner out, as well as a datapad, typing notes into it. "Gravity is zero point nine-nine, one percent lighter than that of Terra." He squinted at his readings. "Nearing Earth-Normal, sea-level."

"You're spouting bullshit," Tommy said.

"It's *science*."

"It's nerdy."

Tubbo rolled his eyes. "Dream, are you reading this?" he said excitedly, his communicator blinking with an active connection. When Tommy looked up and squinted, he wished he could see the gleaming hull of the ship. Unfortunately, being outside the atmosphere, they were far outside the viewing range that he had.

› Loud and clear, Tubbo. ‹

"Shouldn't you be talking to the science officers instead of that green bitch?" Tommy asked.

› I was a science officer—nearly. I was the C.T.O before I was forced to become the helmsman, Tommy, and nearly the C.S.O before that. We're trying to find a replacement so I can go back to Science-ing with George. Also, what makes you think I'm green? I'm Human. ‹.

"I can do it, he offered. "Be a replacement."

› After you've graduated, maybe. Unlike my sister, this isn't a position that a cadet or even Ensign can have. I bet Phil would take you. ‹

"Thanks," he said with a small smile.

Tubbo gasped. "This photosynthesis is crazy! Terra is lucky; I don't understand why plants don't choose the green energy and go for others."

› Because they adapted under different circumstances billions of years ago, Tubbo. ‹

"Right," Tubbo said. "Remember the Nether? Everything there is in shades of red and brown!"

› *That's also a magma-class planet, Tubbo. The reflection of green light—like Terra, and most M-class planets, is shunned, turning the plants green. Plants are the color they are because it reflects the wavelength that the photosynthesizers have shunned — typically those that aren't useful.* ‹

"Huh," Tubbo said, reaching out and plucking a violet leaf. Tommy only took the proffered thing because he hadn't touched an organism on a planet in two years. It felt...new. Crinkly. He let it go and watched it spin to the ground to join dozens of others that had fallen from the wind. "So these plants are taking in green light and not purple light."

› *Right.* ‹

"Interesting," Tubbo said, and Tommy rolled his eyes. "So that means that we could have like bright blue leaves?"

› *Theoretically? Yes. Realistically? No. Scientists think that ninety-nine point nine percent of all plants are keen to suck up blue light, which is high on energy.* ‹

"There's still the point zero one percent that it happens," Tubbo pointed out.

› *There aren't enough planets in the Goldilocks zone that contains nature like this to prove your theory.* ‹

"No," Tubbo argued. "Doesn't that percentage mean one in a thousand?" He gestured towards the sky. "Surely there are a thousand planets out there?"

》 *The nine repeats indefinitely. It would be a hundred percent, but scientists have managed to genetically engineer aqua-colored plants.* ‹

Tommy sighed and leaned against the tree, resting his head against the rough bark and letting Dream and Tubbo's nearly-meaningless conversation flutter into the back of his sleeping mind as he tuned them out; more inclined to feel the wind rustle through his overgrown hair and hear the...

...wait, why weren't the animals chirping?

"Hey, Tubbo," he asked nervously. "By chance, am I going deaf?"

Tubbo glanced at him mid-sentence. "What?"

"Why did the creatures stop in their song?"

Tubbo's eyes widened, and he tilted his head and listened. Even the wind had calmed down as if something was about to happen. "Oh, fuck."

》 *What? What's going on?* ‹

"Earthquake," Tubbo said. "Page me through to Jack; he's the one that knows how to measure natural disasters." Tubbo hesitated. "And sound the red alert. I don't know how bad it will be, but chances are a small one. Don't want to take any risks though."

› *Copy that.* ‹

"Earthquake?" Tommy asked bewilderedly. "How do you know that?"

Tubbo glanced at him. "Falir IV has a few unstable tectonic plates. Didn't you look over the briefing?"

He blinked stupidly. "No."

› *Tubbo?* ‹

"Jack!" Tubbo said. "There's an earthquake coming. Can you get a reading on the scale of it?"

› *It'll be hard, the magnetic plates interfere with my scanning abilities, but I'll try. It should be a mild one, though.* ‹

"Huh," Tommy said. "That rock is moving."

Tubbo glanced down at the rock that was indeed dancing across the grass and paled. "Um...sorry to tell you, Jack, but this one ain't mild."

› *Holy shit—FUNDY! GET THEM OUT OF THERE!* ‹

› *I can't! The magnetic readings are too strong! I can do it if they're on a surface and not moving, but—* ‹

"THREE TO BEAM UP!" Tubbo screeched. "NOW! IT'S A NINE!"

Tommy lurched as the ground rumbled dangerously, watching as a crack split open in the rock next to him. He grabbed Tubbo's hand and wrenched the boy out of the way of the tree that was falling—the same tree that he and Dream had been studying. Purple leaves just *barely* missed chopping their heads off.

› *You have to stand still! I can't beam you up with the magnetics!* ‹

"Dammit, Fundy!" he shouted. "Find a way!" The rock under him split more, and he jumped across a growing chasm, horrified of the inky darkness that appeared below. "WHY THE FUCK ARE THERE SINKHOLES?!"

› *The plates are unstable, Tommy!* ‹

"Almost there," Tubbo said, his voice growing faint as he was dematerialized. "Almost—KRISTIN!"

Tommy left the shorter boy there and ran. Kristin—Kristin had been friendly to him, and she was a nice *person*, and he watched with slow horror as the ground splintered below her feet; the colonists of the planet were already gone. *Stupid bastards.*

Niki's words were forgotten, and Tommy drew on his Avian self, and he sprinted, jumping over growing fractures, hearing Tubbo scream his name and Fundy profanities in the ear, and he ignored it, losing his earpiece somewhere along the way as he moved, pushing the air particles out of the way so he could make the leaps of pure *faith*.

He could not breathe, but Kristin was going to die.

He skidded to a halt, unable to reach her. "Jump!" he said, black spots dancing in front of his eyes as the ground crumbled around her. The stone columns were long gone, crumbled in the sinkhole, and cracks gradually forming near them. "JUMP!" he screamed louder. "I'll catch you!"

Kristin nodded. She moved to jump—and then under her feet, the rock crumbled away, and she fell screaming into blackness. He fumbled for her hand, their fingertips connecting—and he missed, watching with near-horror as she dropped.

He fucking *missed*.

Tommy glanced behind him at the boy that looked onwards with horrified eyes, already half dematerialized, his hand outstretched.

He made his choice and jumped into the darkness after her. They collided with a grunt, and he grabbed her arms and tugged her upwards. He could not *fly*, he was not like Phil, but he could damned well try.

The Avians had always wanted to fly, but they never could.

Tommy gathered the air under him, as solids did naturally against force, and pushed it upwards like a cushion.

It wasn't easy. It wasn't a good idea. He was already exhausted from the short sprint, already about to pass out, and so it wasn't dramatic or *graceful* by any means. He saw a small outcropping of stone and aimed for it, dropping every few feet as he struggled to maintain the glide towards the cliff face.

They crashed into it with a horrifying crunch, and Tommy whimpered as his arm gave out, and he rolled to the solid ground, the pebbles and sharp facets scraping his face and knees and arms and everything *bare*.

He sat there, breathing hard, as he realized that they'd survived. Kristin blinked at him blearily from her position, the bottom and sleeves of her dress torn with large scraps of fabric hanging freely, but holy *shit*, they were alive.

By the lack of rumbling, the earthquake was done.

Tommy blacked out the second he made eye contact with the worried eyes of the Human ambassador, a smile of victory on his face.

› *I'm — I'm sorry, sir. We lost them.* ‹

Phil's grip tightened on the armrests, the dead silence of the bridge speaking measures, dawning terror filling him at his Junior Lieutenant's words. "All of them?"

› *N-no. Tubbo's here. Tommy and Kristin fell.* ‹

He wouldn't cry in front of his crew. He *wouldn't*. He was stronger than that. Techno's hand resting on his shoulder wasn't helping, and all Philza wanted to do was sob because he'd lost the woman that had been *his* star in everything. "Oh God," he whispered. "Oh, God."

He wished that they'd gone back to Elytra before it was too late. Just—to see if Kristin had been compatible, to *make* that link so he could know, in situations like this, if his wife still lived. Even though she was Human, she had tried so hard to fight for his species' lack of disdain, to prove herself to them. They did not think she was worthy, but to Phil, she was everything.

Nobody had a response to his words. Not even Wilbur—and his C.C.O had an answer for everything. "Can we send a search party down?"

› *Jack has stated that the earthquake has subsided, sir. It seems only natural that we would...though I do not think we will find anything.* ‹

Phil breathed out. "Is there a chance?"

› *I... if they are alive, we will find them. The median fall distance is four stories, but it is...possible to survive a long distance. I do warn you that the chances are objectionably small.* ‹

"Anything," he replied.

"I'm with you," his First Officer said. "We're in this together, alright?"

"Okay," he said.

He wasn't okay by any means.

"Comms aren't working," Kristin said with some disgust.

"I lost mine," he groaned. Fortunately, despite blacking out because of Avian-biology, he hadn't stopped breathing. Kristin had woken him up by shaking him and shouting his name for seven minutes straight.

He'd broken his right arm and two fingers on his left hand. Hell knew what else he'd done. On the narrow shelf that they lay on—ten feet in width and about twenty in length—they could just barely see the sky, a crack of light maybe as wide as his finger.

"We should climb," he said.

"That's a terrible idea," Kristin replied instantly. "Your right arm is messed up, and you can't grip anything with your left."

"Can't grip anything...legally," he said.

"I don't think that's quite the right word," the Human replied. "Plus, that's like...thousands of yards."

"I'm strong," he argued, nearly blacking out as he tried to point with his hand.

Kristin raised an eyebrow. "Don't think I didn't see that."

"You didn't see anything," he said guiltily.

"Didn't Niki tell you *not* to use your Avian abilities?" she asked.

"Yeah, but you were falling..." he trailed off. "I...needed to save you."

"Thank you, Tommy," Kristin said sincerely. "I'm just worried about your health. My husband was concerned—that's an understatement—when you collapsed in the gym, and the medical officers were all but stumped on how to get you to breathe again. I don't want you to do that again."

"I don't want you to fall."

"I didn't."

"Because I got you," he pointed out, and Kristin sighed graciously.

"I suppose you're right. But no climbing out. Otherwise, I'm telling Niki that you purposely tried to make your injuries worse."

"Now that's just blackmail," he grumbled with a slight shudder. "She would believe you, too."

"That's the point, Tommy."

"Well," he said, after a moment. "This is a pickle. I'd ask you to hand me the communicator, and I'd see if I could temporarily boost the power—but unfortunately, I'm limited at the hand movements."

Kristin scooted over, and he noted that she winced as her ankle got temporarily lodged on a rock. Ah, so she'd sprained or broken her foot. Well, that wasn't good. "I could be your hands," she said. "I don't really know how technology works. Languages were always my forte." She shook her head. "Not like Wilbur, though. I prefer speaking. He's more of a poet."

"Sure, whatever," he said, feeling drowsy. "Hold down the reset button; it'll cancel the attempts for the comm to link up with unlinkable sources."

Kristin stared at him. "But—that cancels our connection to the *L'manburg*."

"Yes," he agreed. "But they'll be scanning for any connections. If we cancel them, it boosts the power when we try to send a signal. We're not trying to send *words*; I'm trying to give it a boost so that they sense something down here."

"Don't worry," Kristin said. "They'll find us. They won't stop searching for a few days."

"But—" he said, swallowing, as he watched her press the necessary buttons to reset it, the commlinks to the separate stations on the *L'manburg* going dark one by one. "What if Command orders them home?"

"Then my husband gets a reprimand," Kirsten said with some amusement. "Probably a stern talking to for directly disobeying orders because of emotional compromise." She shrugged. "Worst-case scenario—they don't find us, Techno becomes captain, and the natives eventually find us."

"You think they well?" he asked.

She nodded. "Of course. They search earthquakes—which happen pretty regularly, so they've developed technology to dematerialize out—for minerals. They'll find us within the week, and we'll get home." She reached out and patted his shoulder. Tommy winced as a shock of pain. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry—but they'll find us, okay? Someone will." She held up the comm. "Also, now what?"

"Press the main button every seven seconds on the dot," he instructed. "It sends out an electronic pulse that can be picked up by the scanners. Not enough to establish a connection, but enough so that they can trace it to us."

Kristin stared at him. "You're brilliant," she said finally.

"I know."

The Human rolled her eyes. "No—that's not what I meant," she sighed. "It's more of your *ingenuity* that amazes me. What doesn't amaze me is your capability to get injured."

He scoffed. "It's not my fault that bad things happen around me."

It was meant as a joke, but it hit a little close to home.

"Hey," Kristin said, seeing his face fall as she pressed the button, counting down the seconds. "It's not your liability, okay?"

"What?" he asked. She...couldn't know, could she?

"The *H.M.S Fran*," she said, and he deflated with relief. "You couldn't have known that the Arachnids would get it. There was nothing that could have been done."

"It was chasing us," he said, tucking his knees to his chest. "It—it was a *trap*, and we couldn't run, and then they decided to drive the rest of the ship into the Arachnids so that the survivors could have a chance of survival." He scowled. "I'm the only crew member left, and I wasn't even technically a crew member."

"But the Piglins and Hoglins are," Kristin reminded him gently. "We heard from Clementine's records that they were the only ones left of their species."

"So were the Avians," he pointed out. "Now look how few we number." He shook his head. "I don't know anymore."

"Techno was on that ship," Kristin said softly. "That mission was an important one. The fifteen-year mission your parents were part of was highly secretive. We only heard about it after—and Captain Sam encrypted Clementine's black box so that only long strings of specific code words and letters can open them." She shook her head. "The special forces missions and runs have never been uncovered, and Command never told the public if they ever figured it out."

Tommy raised his head, thinking of the single string of numbers and symbols that his father had told him before he had rushed off to die. It meant something—perhaps an encoding of a final critical mission that he needed to take back to Command.

His father had told him not to trust anyone.

Tommy closed his mouth.

› *Hey, Phil?* ‹

"Yeah, Wil?" Philza sighed tiredly, from where he was soaring over the purple vegetation.

› *Minx contacted me. You know how she specializes in computerized communications? Comm links and all that?* ‹

"Yes."

› *Well...she thinks that she found something.* ‹

"Patch them through," he said instantly.

› *Not like that. It's a signal, nothing more. Not enough to establish a stable connection.* ‹

"Then *trace* it," he said, motioning to the only other Elytrian on the ship that he'd had come with him; an Ensign to Sapnap nicknamed Hannah Rose. He needed her wings to fly with him; it was faster than getting a means of transport and having crew members search on foot. Which they were *doing*—but this covered more ground.

› *Yes, captain. Sending you the coordinates now.* ‹

Tommy heard movement and heard Kristin cry out in a mix of choked laughter and love, and he watched with relaxed relief as Philza landed next to his wife and drew her into a careful hug, noting as she hissed when he touched her ankle. Another girl with wings—though hers were a deep rose-red—landed next to Philza, her eyes looking over Tommy carefully.

"You two okay?" Phil asked finally, wiping tears of joy onto his captain's uniform.

"Lucky fall," the Elytrian girl guessed.

"No," Kristin said. "I would have died without Tommy. He..." she trailed off, unable to explain.

"I *glided*," he said proudly. He would have done jazz hands, but his arms were all sorts of fucked up.

"Avian?" Philza guessed with narrow eyes.

He nodded, sulking slightly. "Increased the force of air beneath me. It's an advanced skill—and unfortunately, one I never really mastered. I learned it about eight years ago."

"Well," Phil said. "Thank you, Tommy. For saving my wife."

"No problem," he said. "We were falling anyway."

"That's a lie," the Elytrian girl objected. "Tubbo said you jumped in after her right when you should have been dematerialized."

He pointed a hand at her, wincing at the pain. "That's not true. Tubbo's spreading rumors again."

"Are your *fingers* broken?" Phil asked.

"His hand is too," Kristin said helpfully.

Tommy sighed.

Chapter End Notes

Some articles that I used to help me with science (because I am not, in fact, all knowing):

[https://web.extension.illinois.edu/askextension/thisQuestion.cfm?](https://web.extension.illinois.edu/askextension/thisQuestion.cfm?ThreadID=13974#:~:text=There%20are%20purple%20and%20maroon,so%20there%20are%20blue%20pigments.&text=The%20purple%20comes%20from%20the%20anthocyanins)

[ThreadID=13974#:~:text=There%20are%20purple%20and%20maroon,so%20there%20are%20blue%20pigments.&text=The%20purple%20comes%20from%20the%20anthocyanins](https://web.extension.illinois.edu/askextension/thisQuestion.cfm?ThreadID=13974#:~:text=There%20are%20purple%20and%20maroon,so%20there%20are%20blue%20pigments.&text=The%20purple%20comes%20from%20the%20anthocyanins).

The Golden Gate Ain't Golden, And Neither Am I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

You can't master your future

if you're a slave to your past.

- Unknown

"Four to beam up," Philza said into his communicator when they had breached the surface. Tommy clung to the Elytrian girl—her name was Hannah—as they landed on the rock. He winced as his hand moved, and Hannah muttered a small apology.

› *You found them, Captain?!* ‹

Phil smiled at Fundy's excited voice. Tommy decided to speak up. "No!" he shouted. "Phil just picked up some orphans!"

Purpled, Ranboo, Niki, Techno, and Tubbo were waiting for them as they rematerialized away from Falir VI. Which he was glad for. He was never going back to that fucking ball of unstable rocks.

"Injuries?" Niki demanded, whipping out a scanner and going to Kristin first.

"Sprained ankle," the Human said, leaning on her husband. "He's the worse one-off."

Niki descended on him with a rage of a thousand suns, and she had Techno carry him to medbay, the half-Piglin surprisingly gentle as Kristin ambled beside them.

"Wait a second," Purpled said, as Techno set him on a cot with a certain dexterity that made him sigh with relief. "Aren't *we* orphans?"

"What?" he asked, confused. "No, *no* more hyposprays, Niki, please, I'm—OW! What the hell?"

"Numbing," the Merling said through narrowed eyes, tossing one to Ranboo, who administered it a bit gentler to Kristin in the bed over. "You're staying overnight. You're a mess."

"But Kristin doesn't have to," he whined as she pulled out a bone knitter.

Niki clucked her tongue. "Kristin doesn't get into a medical mess every twenty-four hours," she pointed out. "Also, I trust her not to sprint everywhere the moment she can put weight on her ankle."

"That's just rude."

"To be fair, Tommy, you *were* suggesting we climb out," Kristin said.

"You were trying to WHAT?" Niki shouted, looking crazier and crazier by the second.

"I wasn't!" he said. "It was merely a delusional statement!" Tubbo snickered, and Purpled rolled his eyes. "Please don't give me another hypospray."

"Don't worry," Niki drawled. "You're only allowed to have seven within the hour anyway. Here's six more."

"NO!"

"Stop being a baby," she chastised him. "It's just a needle."

"What if it breaks inside?" he asked, as she held down his arm and pushed another numbing hypospray inside. He refused to admit in the slightest that it helped the pain—he *wouldn't*.

"We're on a spaceship, Tommy. Modern technology has evolved. It's not going to break inside." She glanced over at Ranboo. "His wrist isn't broken. It's fractured, and the bone knitter isn't going to cut it. Can you go get the microscopic laser?"

"EXCUSE ME?" he shouted.

"Shh," Niki said. "We'll knock you out. When you're awake, your arm will be in a cast and your fingers in a splint. You should be out of it tomorrow—hell, if it were anyone else, I'd let them leave after a bit of rest with a careful warning. You? No. You're staying."

"But Niki..."

"That's *Lieutenant Nihachu* to you."

Tommy cast a pleading gaze to the rest of the room's occupants, including the three boys around his own age, but everyone had varying degrees of amusement on their faces—save Techno, who just looked bored.

"So," Niki said, spinning around. Tommy yelped as he spied the hypospray in her left hand. She pulled a mask over her face and glared at everyone else. "The rest of you need to move over. Ranboo, I need you to be my assistant for this surgery." She rolled her eyes at Tommy's reaction. "Oh, relax. It's minor."

"So am I," he snarked.

"Do you want to be awake while I painstakingly put your bones back together, or not?" she asked.

"Out," he said instantly.

"Good," she said. "Then stop being sarcastic and arguing with me; otherwise, I'll strap you down and forgo the painkillers."

"That sounds like torture," he said.

She narrowed her eyes. "Everyone else, go over in the corner. Any noise, and I'm kicking you out. Ready? *Go* ." In the same motion, she slammed the hypospray with absolutely more force than was necessary into Tommy's thigh.

He was out before he could throw her the middle finger.

Tommy ended up disembarking from Terra with a brace around his wrist. Fortunately, he was able to get out of a full-body cast—though Niki argued for it heavily. Officers were waiting for them, some of them welcoming the bridge crew with familiarity. Still, Tommy mostly stayed with Lani and Dream's sister, Drista, waiting for the shuttle that was supposed to take them to Fleet school so he could start his first classes and they could continue their studies.

"You know," Purpled said, from where he was standing next to Tommy, the Terran sun making his magenta eyes shine all the brighter. Ranboo was a silent force behind them, though Tommy saw many eyes glance their direction. He had to remind himself that it wasn't him they were looking at, yet instead the two known survivors of the Red Planet's Genocide. "I'm not looking forward to this."

"Why?" he asked curiously.

"The media," the Human grumbled. "We'll be staying aboard the *L'manburg*, fortunately, but I'm still worried. They want to know the details of what happened." Tommy bit his lip and thought of the spaceship that was currently docked in space, rotating around Terra. They had taken a shuttle down to the landing zone.

"That's awfully invasive," Lani put in, frowning.

"It's the *media*," Drista pointed out. "They think that they have a right to every inch of private life that everyone has."

"Fair point," Purpled grumbled, and they all watched from under the overhang of the space transport as a tall Phantom male with brown hair stepped in front of someone that was trying to shove a microphone in Tubbo's face. "I sort of feel bad for him."

"He loves his job," Lani murmured. "There are downsides to shore leave. But don't worry, he'll go back to his archaic video games and will stay shut up screaming about swords and missing jumps and—" she cut herself off with a small laugh. "He—*we* wouldn't give this up for anything."

Purpled made a slight noise of agreement. "At least there's the ability to online game here."

"So," Tommy asked. "Drista." The blonde-haired girl looked over at him. "What're you studying at school?"

"The regular stuff," she said. "Chemistry. Calculus. Physics. Astronomy. Technology. History."

"No," he snorted. "Like...major?"

"Oh," Drista said, chewing at her lip. "I'm not on the Command path, if you're wondering," she said. "Fortunately. They're supposed to be worked really hard." The girl shuddered at the thought. "I'm following my brother. When I was little, I wanted to be different, but we're similar because we're *family*, so I figured out that liking the same thing was okay. I'm a Junior Tactical Officer."

Tommy tilted his head. "Is that why the chair is empty in the Tactical Officer spot?" he asked. "because Dream is the C.T.O?"

"Exactly," Drista said, snapping her fingers for emphasis. "Before the pilot sort of died, and he filled in temporarily. Or, well, it was *supposed* to be temporary but it sort of turned full-time."

"But—he talked about Science Officers and some guy named George..." Tommy trailed off.

Drista rolled his eyes. "He dabbles in just about everything, the show-off. Yes, he spends a lot of time in the science department. And he's *such* a nerd, too! You would think he would've majored in science—but no, he went into internal security instead." She threw up her hands. "From the amount of time I hear him talking about plants and trees and thermology, it's a wonder that he gets anything done."

"*I'm* the one that talks about thermology," Lani said.

"Whatever."

Tommy glanced over with a slight pain in his chest as the two girls argued playfully, and Purpled saw his look and gave a sad little reminiscent smile. There was little they could say at the moment, though. "Apparently, I have to go speak with the Admiral because I missed testing a few months ago?"

"Makes sense," Drista mused thoughtfully. "Phil wrote you a letter of recommendation, right?"

He blinked. "Uh—yeah, yeah, he did." The piece of paper that he hadn't opened and read—even though Phil had told him he could—lay in his back pocket. "Is that going to help?"

Purpled snorted, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Tommy, you'd get into Fleet school regardless of that letter or not. Here's to hoping they're smart enough to bump you up a few years."

"Ooh," Lani said. "Maybe you'll join some of my classes. I have a couple of Year Three ones and some Year Four." She tilted her head. "Barring the medical ones, of course, besides basic field

medicine." Tommy opened his mouth to ask another nervous question, but Lani interrupted him. "If you're worried about what classes to pick, don't worry. The Admiral is pretty smart. We're all pretty aware that you want to be a pilot. You'll probably have to take some of the normal classes plus those ones."

"But what about the ones I'll skip?" he asked.

"You can probably skip Survival Strategies," Purpled said. Tommy glared at him, unamused. "And Basic Flight Control too. And—well, it doesn't matter. If you know the class, tell the instructor, and they'll probably let you skip it if you can demonstrate the knowledge. It happens, sometimes. It happened with Tubbo a lot."

"God, they hated him," Lani said. "Not really," she explained when she saw Tommy's nervous look. "It was just funny—he'd enter a class at the beginning of a term, and people would make bets on whether he knew the contents already."

Speaking of Tubbo...

"Tommy!"

He looked up and saw Tubbo waving them over. The five of them made their way through the slightly calmer crowd, Tommy dropping back and then stepping to the side, so Ranboo and Purpled were in the center. He ignored every question thrown his way as he made his way to one of the transports, which the bridge crew was already in, the other branches of the team in various other transports. Techno, with his pink hair and tusks poking out of his lower lip, was still attempting his bored look—though by now, Tommy knew better and saw the shifty glances he was giving the crowd, and the phaser strapped to his waist.

Phil and Kristin looked far more at ease, though Phil sat a bit too close to his wife—even if they were married—and Kristin rolled her eyes when he raised his eyebrows.

"Bastard is overprotective," she said, winking.

Phil ruffled indignantly, his wings shifting in an annoyed fashion. "Excuse me; I didn't nearly die by falling down a fault from an earthquake."

It sounded like they'd had this argument a million times.

"I'm so glad I'm not married," Tommy said, receiving a huffing laugh from Techno and a full-out one from Wilbur. Purpled rolled his eyes.

"I wish I were married again," Tubbo said wistfully.

"*Stop*," Ranboo said, rolling his eyes.

"Being divorced is just so difficult."

"This transport is going to Fleet school, right?" Drista interrupted, sitting down next to her brother as the plexiglass door closed, effectively shutting off the sound. Tommy shoved Tubbo playfully into Ranboo and sat down in the space between the smaller boy and the C.C.O, who stuck out his tongue.

"Yeah," Phil answered as the transport shuttle took off.

"What are *you* guys doing at Fleet school?" he asked, crossing his arms. "I know why Lani and Drista are there, and they gotta get their dorms and shit before classes tomorrow—so that makes sense why Tubbo and Dream are there, being family...what the fuck are the rest of you doing?"

"Well, Kristin wanted to see how you did on your test," Phil said. "And I'm not leaving her alone anytime soon—who knows what kind of trouble she'll get into—"

"At least Niki didn't call me a walking trainwreck," Kristin pointed out, eyeing Tommy.

He threw up his hands. "I don't *understand*! Why does she think I'll end up dying if I'm not with someone every ten seconds?"

"Well," Techno said. "That could be because your first meeting was holding a boy who had just gotten stabbed." Tubbo snorted. "And then when you met her again—I think it was drug abuse?"

"Yes," Purpled said, amused. "It was."

"*Recovering*," he corrected. "She still gave me daily hyposprays to wean me off the effects."

"Still plans to," Wilbur chortled. Tommy glared. "It's sort of funny. She's like an overprotective mother hen."

"That likes shoving needles in their fledglings," he muttered. "Sick, twisted mother hens."

"I'm not done yet," Techno said. "Apparently, you relapsed—"

"I made a joke that everyone took seriously."

"—*relapsed*, and then you raced Tubbo in the gym and stopped breathing, and she and her team had to shove a tube down your throat because you decided that you just didn't want to live and blocked all air from coming into your body. Then you had the brilliant decision to leap into a hole—which, good job, by the way, you saved Kristin, so it wasn't completely stupid, just mostly stupid—and fractured your wrist and broke two of your fingers." Techno raised an eyebrow. "Might I remind you that all of this was over *four* days? Fortunately, we've had two days since that bout, but that's because Niki locked you up in medbay."

"I—" he started.

"Oh my God," Purpled interrupted, magenta eyes widening. "It's been six days since he's arrived?"

"Uh, yeah?" Techno said.

Purpled turned in his seat to glare at Tommy. "It was your birthday the day before yesterday!"

He sunk lower in his seat. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Purpled pointed an accusing finger at him. "No! I *cannot* believe you spent your birthday in the medbay!"

"How old are you?" Wilbur asked him quietly.

"Seventeen," he said.

Phil put his head in his hands. "That's why you didn't want to answer when I first asked you," he said. "God, you're *seventeen*—by a few days!"

He scowled. "I've had worse weeks."

"That really doesn't make it better," Dream said.

"I don't get it," Lani said. "I'm fourteen. Drista is fifteen. What's so bad about him being seventeen?"

"I wouldn't have let him down with the landing party," Philza snapped.

"That's why I didn't tell you," he said. "How old did you *think* I was?"

"Eighteen?" Wilbur said, looking slightly nauseated. Tommy snorted, shaking his head.

"I knew," Tubbo pointed out.

"So did I," Purpled added.

"Okay," Phil sighed. "Raise of hands, who knew that Tommy was sixteen before his birthday—uh, two days ago?"

Ranboo, Lani, Tubbo, and Purpled raised their hands.

Phil threw up his hands. "Great," he said. "The children are rebelling against me." Purpled winced slightly, and Tommy's stomach lurched. Wilbur nudged the Elytrian, and Phil blanched. "I—sorry, that wasn't what I meant."

"It's okay," Purpled muttered, for the benefit of Tommy and Ranboo.

Tommy pressed a hand to the window and gazed at the teeming city below. It had been—well, he had *never* seen Terra in person, actually. He'd been in simulations that were real-as-life to this one, but now he *knew* he was here. They were in—California, apparently—and in the distance, he saw the rusted bridge that crossed the ocean of whatever-body-of-water-that-was. The Golden Gate bridge?

It wasn't golden, and so Tommy was just confused.

"Niki knew," Lani pointed out. "The only reason the rest of us know is because we were in the room when Tommy said it."

"Okay, no wonder Niki was a mother hen," Phil said. Tommy closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat. His aunt—Puffy—had used to call him a duckling. "Sheesh, Tommy. You're a literal child."

"And you're old," he said, and Wilbur choked.

"Happy birthday," Tubbo said.

"Thanks, but no thanks," he said, crossing his arms. "I don't like celebrating birthdays."

"That's stupid," Drista sniffed. Dream hissed something under his breath, but his blonde-haired sister didn't listen. "You shouldn't let your past change the actions in the future."

"That's...really not how it works," he said. "You learn from the past, and you apply it to your future." Drista snorted. "I nearly died on my last birthday. Seven times. And before that..." he trailed off.

Before that, he had celebrated his birthday on the Red Planet. That had been even less enjoyable than nearly dying seven times. Somehow.

"So you had a few shitty birthdays—"

"I've had seven shitty birthdays ever since I watched my family blow up in an explosion," he said quietly, and every single person in the transport flinched. "*Birthday* is just another year older. Older means less protection."

"Why didn't they just kill you?" Wilbur asked.

He lifted his chin. "Because I am the last known living Avian, and even if *Chroma*—" he spat the name, and both Ranboo and Purpled blanched heavily. "—still lives, then I'm still the last child."

"Chroma's an Avian?" Phil said.

He closed his eyes. Well, he hadn't known they didn't know. "Yes," he said finally. "He is." Tommy let out a shaky breath. "Anyway, the Arachnids were curious about—us. About our species. Since we're so secretive." He grinned, but it was forced and shaky and *wrong*.

"You can control air," Dream said quietly.

"Well—" he saw Dream's look. "—basically, yeah. Without getting into specifics."

"Anything else important we should know?" Phil asked.

Tommy glanced out the window at the swift approaching Fleet school building and the Golden Gate Bridge in the background, bordered by the setting sun.

So much. He had so much inside. "I can't eat meat. I need to sleep at high places, or else I get nightmares and headaches." He forced another smile. "But that's not because I'm an Avian. That's just because the Arachnids fucked with my brain."

"They...*what*?" Phil said with a dangerous calm.

He raised an eyebrow. "You think they just *watched* me every time I was in prison, *Captain*? Nah." He tapped his head. "When I was eleven, they messed up, and I had seizures for a few months before they suck some tech in my head to stop that. When I was twelve, I shattered my femur because I had too many painkillers, and I had to—again—have microscopic laser surgery." Wilbur looked vaguely sick, Phil horrified, and even Techno had lost his bored expression. Purpled's was forced straight because he *knew*—Tommy had told him before. Tubbo's eyes were comically wide. "Eight months ago, they thought it would be cool to give me—like a permanent stimulant—"

"That's incredibly dangerous," Dream interrupted.

"I know," he said carefully, shrugging. "But what can one do? I certainly couldn't do a thing. Anyway, it fucked my brain, so now I can only sleep in places with artificial gravity or in high places."

"How the fuck does that work?" Tubbo asked curiously.

"Hell if I know," he snorted. "It's not like I ever tested it." Purpled blinked at him. "The few planets we've had 'field trips' to—" he made air quotes with his fingers. "—I've either slept in trees or a dormitory. It's not that I *can't* sleep lower to the ground, it's just hard to fall asleep, and I get nightmares."

"Perhaps we could get in contact with a neuroscientist," Wilbur suggested. "There has to be one that owes you a favor, right, Dream?"

The green-eyed man rubbed his chin. "Hmm. I think I know one or two."

Techno rolled his eyes. "You know *everyone*."

"That's because I have the capability to be social, instead of you, Mr. Stand-There-And-Look-Scary."

"Okay!" Tubbo said, clapping his hands. "New plan! Tommy goes and takes his entrance exam, Lani and Drista gets their dorm room settled, and the rest of us throw a birthday party!"

"No," he said firmly.

Everyone ignored him.

"Don't let Ranboo bake the cake," Drista warned. "He puts too much frosting on it."

"I do *not*!" Ranboo said, rolling his eyes. "It's the perfect amount of frosting!"

The Human girl smirked, mimicking holding a jar. "We have not one, not two, not three..." she paused dramatically. "We have three cans of frosting."

Tommy wrinkled his nose. "I haven't had frosting in years, and that sounds gross."

"It's not!" Ranboo said defensively. "It was to drown amount the sheer power of the chocolate M&M's I put on there!"

Phil sighed, but he had a slight smile on his face. "Remind me to tell Karl never to let you into the kitchen again."

"Karl wasn't there," Tubbo said. "Karl also wasn't there when Ranboo put spaghetti in everyone's cereal."

Dream looked slightly disgusted. "Oh, George thought those were snakes."

"*Snakes?*" Ranboo said. "It's *pasta*."

Dream shrugged. "He's colorblind."

There was a pause.

"That's not how colorblindness works," Purpled pointed out, always the diplomat.

Tommy sighed. "I don't want a birthday party," he said.

"Why?" Tubbo asked him.

"Because—" he cut himself off, floundering for an answer. "Um...I don't want to bother you?"

"It was *my* idea," Tubbo said. "Therefore, you're not bothering me." Tommy raised an eyebrow. "So! Birthday party! Ranboo isn't baking—maybe I'll get Bad to do it. He's good at baking."

"He'll drag Skeppy into it, and then the entire kitchen will be a mess," Techno pointed out.

"The one with the blue hair?" Tommy asked. "His boyfriend, right?"

Tubbo snickered. "That's what I thought too. Nah, they're just friends."

"Oh," Tommy said, his face red.

Wilbur patted him on the back. "Trust me; they're sus sometimes. There's the friend boundary—and then there's Skeppy and Bad dynamic, which closely mirrors the Dream and George dynamic." He shrugged. "A lot of people think both pairs are dating."

"I wouldn't be opposed," Dream said with a teasing grin.

Drista pointed a finger at her brother. "You don't make the rumors dispel."

"Why *should* I make the rumors dispel?" the green-eyed Human asked.

"Uh..." Ranboo said. "Because they're not true?"

"Yeah, but it's funny."

Phil cleared his throat. "We're here, Tommy."

Tommy glanced towards the door, which slid open as he watched to reveal a bustling campus of red-uniformed people—Humans and other species alike. Fleet school was *here*, but Command was a space station...somewhere. Apparently, it was classified.

To be fair, everything was classified.

"Good luck!" Tubbo chirped, waving goodbye to him as he stood up.

Purpled tugged on his arm as he made to step onto the pavement of Terra. "If it means anything..." the magenta-eyed Human said in a low voice. "Then I am sorry, because I did not know you still lived."

"What?" Tommy asked, but Purpled had shoved him out to stand next to Phil, the rest of the crew staying on. Purpled smiled at him apologetically, pressing a hand against the glass as the transport once again took off to go to another destination—probably the dorms, if Tommy had followed the conversation correctly.

"Come on, Tommy," Philza murmured. "Let's go."

Tommy huffed as he watched the transport leave, Purpled's ominous words leaving him slightly confused. Movement around them paused as the current students—most of whom were preparing for the term to start the next day—glanced at them.

Yet—for once—they weren't staring at him. Oh, sure, some of them were. But not for who *he* was. For who the person next to him was. For the first time, Tommy was reminded that Phil was, in fact, a legend among the Galactic Rebellion. And even if some people didn't know who *he* was, they sure as hell knew what the *L'manburg* was.

Like, come it. It was a pretty diverse ship with a very young crew. And not only that—it was highly successful.

One of the students—from what Tommy could see, they were a Merling, with the same tube that Niki had in their nose—came up to Phil. "Captain?" she said, her voice slightly shaky.

"Cadet," Phil returned, dipping his head.

"I was wondering if you could give me a brief retelling of the Hardcore mission?" she asked.

Phil smiled somberly, putting a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "I'm sorry, but I have to escort Tommy here to the Admiral. We have an important appointment." Tommy noticed that Phil's wings ruffled as if they had a mind of their own.

"O-of course," the Merling sputtered. "Sorry to bother you."

"It is of no consequence," the Elytrian assured her. "I suggest you check out my First Officer's logs. They're...wordy, but they give a lot of valuable information that my reports do not."

"Oh!" the girl said. "Thank you so much, Captain!"

Phil watched her go with a fond look. Tommy tilted his head. "You know her?" he asked.

"No," Phil said as they entered the building. It was mostly empty; students were preferably staying outside in the late day sun. "She reminds me of Niki."

"Ah," Tommy said, swallowing. "I don't see the connection."

Phil laughed softly, shaking his head. "You will," he promised, as they walked up two flights of stairs, his wings slightly outstretched for balance. "If you get to know her, you'll see that curious side of her as well."

"Hopefully, that doesn't involve hyposprays," he muttered.

"That's not all Niki is."

"Really?" he questioned. "Because all I feel is needle pain whenever I see her. I think I have PTSD or some shit."

Philza smiled at him again with deep blue eyes, and Tommy—politely—turned away so the captain could type in a code down a staff-only hallway. It was cooler here—nicer carpets and even some modern paintings that Tommy didn't understand. They reached a seating room first, and Phil sat down on one of the chairs.

"Go on," the Elytrian said. "He's waiting for you."

Tommy glanced at the silver doors and gulped, pushing them gently. They gave way with relative ease, and he glanced once more back at Phil, who motioned him to continue. Tommy slipped through the crack, feeling like his doom had just come over him as the doors closed.

It was a pleasant office, with a window overlooking the bay area and a padded seat, along with a few floating holographic models of the muted newsfeed—Tommy saw the *L'manburg* flash—and some lists of ship and tech parts.

A—Human?—male sat in the command chair, tapping something onto his datapad with practiced hands. He had short-cropped hair and tanned skin, and Tommy recognized the Admiral pin upon his dark aqua uniform.

"Sir," he said uneasily, folding his arms behind the small of his back.

The Admiral looked up at him, smiling with a familiarity Tommy hadn't known they shared. "Ah," he said, with an all-knowing voice that greatly reminded Tommy of—well, of Chroma. "Tommy Innes. So we meet at last."

Chapter End Notes

The Admiral (or Vice-Admiral, as is his official rank) is NOT an OC.

Who do you think he is? (if you look at the characters tagged that's cheating)

Confidential ≠ Avoidance, But I Avoid My Past Like You Do Your Mental Health

The past is a monster.

The question is, can you

defeat that monster?

Or will it control your mind?

- Aria Cinabun

Tommy's jaw dropped as the male smiled at him, with his chin propped up on his hands. "How—how the fuck do you know who I am?"

"I know everything."

Tommy stared at him.

"Just kidding," the Admiral laughed. "I only know some things. We do have a file on you," he added, typing something into his datapad and then holding it out. Tommy took it with slightly shaking hands, still in shock that the Admiral knew about—him. Who his parents were—or at least, who Sam was.

Thomas Innes

↳ Age

↳ 17 Standard Years

↳ Species

↳ Avian

↳ Family

↳ Son of (*deceased*) Captain Sam Innes & (*deceased*) Lieutenant Clara Innes of the *H.M.S Fran*

↳ Nephew to (*deceased*) co-Captain Cara Puffy of the *H.M.S Fran*

↳ Brother to (*deceased*) Clementine Innes (*aged four months*)

↳ Additional Notes

↳ The only known crew survivor of the *H.M.S Fran*; could possibly contain information on Captain Sam's lost missions

↳ One of the three known survivors of the Red Planet's Genocide, and also the leader of the Children's Rebellion. *See Purpled and Ranboo for more information.*

↳ Spent nearly a total of five years in the asteroid prison known as the Wasteland

↳ One of the last remaining Avians in the universe

He nearly dropped the datapad from the shock as he read the contents. The Admiral caught it with a deft hand, placing it back down on the desk.

"How—how the fuck do you know all this?" he demanded, hands clenched in fists.

"It's relatively easy to figure out who you were," the Admiral said quietly, no anger returned in his eyes. "I've known you've existed ever since you were born."

"And the rest of the Rebellion...?" he asked.

"Your file is classified," the Admiral responded. "I'm the only one who's seen it, as technically, Avians as a species fall under my line of knowledge. Usually, there'd be a species leader, but...well." So he was Human.

"But I don't get it," Tommy said, staring at his hands like they were going to bite. "How do you have this information?"

"Your parents sent me the details of your birth when you were born," the Admiral admitted. "Your...sister's, as well, before she passed." Tommy winced, squeezing his eyes shut. "I learned the rest from your friend. Purpled."

So that's what he meant by 'I'm sorry,' Tommy thought with dawning horror. "He...told you?"

"He told someone for the benefit of the Galactic Rebellion," the Admiral corrected. "About Pogtopia. About Alyssa...Foolish...Grian...and a boy named Tommy who had walked away to get revenge. Captain Philza sent me a comm about an uninvited guest they'd picked up on their mission—namely you—and he mentioned that you were extremely talented." The Admiral shrugged. "After he said you were an Avian, I put the pieces together."

Tommy swallowed, reaching into his pocket and withdrawing the letter of recommendation. "I...have this for you," he said, stuttering slightly.

The Admiral took it and set it on the desk without unrolling it. "You're already in, kid. I have your names and classes. You said you wanted to follow the Command path and become a pilot?"

"What?" he spluttered. "Don't I— isn't there an entrance exam?"

"Yes," the Admiral said. "It's quite interesting, actually. It has a hundred and fifty-one questions. The first hundred and forty have to do with algebra and biology—the school subjects that you learn before you come here, of course. The next ten is more personal. What-if situations. No-win scenarios. Choices that people might have to make should they join the Galactic Rebellion."

"And the last?" Tommy asked with a dry mouth.

"The last was added recently," the Admiral said slowly. "Within the past year and a half, actually. It's...well, it's about you, in a way. It's...a scenario about a situation similar to Pogtopia. You're a kid—you're the leader of the Children's Rebellion, and there are many details and choices you have to make." Tommy bit his lip. "It's a simulation. We don't really focus on the first hundred and forty. Sure, they *matter*—but even if you get a perfect score on the, we mostly focus on the free-response

ones. Knowledge—equations, memorization—*that* we can change easily. Heart—now that has always been more difficult to change."

"You don't want another Chroma," Tommy said flatly.

"Yes," the Admiral said sadly. "We do not want another graduate from Fleet school to walk away and use their lessons learned for the purposes of a greater evil."

"But—can't they lie?"

"Of course," the Admiral said. "And they do. But the lies are easier to tell. The lies always go with the easiest, best decision. They don't make the *right* decision, and that is how they fail. They choose to save the people that are being executed—and so they die."

Tommy squeezed his eyes shut and thought of the girl with her hand in the air and defiance in her gaze. He thought of the Elytrian with purple wings and his arm raised as he fought for freedom—as the Phantom with glowing wings died and fell with the rest of them.

As the other three members of the Children's Rebellion were executed in front of him.

"My team and I scanned the security cameras," the Admiral said after Tommy had—attempted—to gather himself. "I saw you in the crowd. I saw the choice you made."

"Was it the right one?" he asked in a broken whisper.

"Yes," the Admiral said without hesitation. "It is the hardest choice that anybody must make—but had you gone to save them, Ranboo and Purpled would not be here, and neither would you. Nobody would be here, and the Red Planet would have been a complete genocide."

"I watched them die."

"And you see *them* live," he said, swiping to pull up a picture of Purpled on his datapad and spinning the datapad around to show Tommy. He looked on as the Admiral swiped to reveal a laughing half-albino Enderian—a picture frozen in time, three tubes of frosting next to an ugly-looking cake. Tommy's heart hurt just looking at it. "You made the right choice, like it or not," the Admiral told him softly.

"It's my fault they're dead," he insisted, a singular tear rolling down his face.

"No," the Admiral said. "It is *my* fault that *my* friends are dead, but it is not your fault that yours are." He shook his head. "My mistakes were my fault, and they are so clearly there, but yours...yours were not. If you blame anybody, blame the Avian called Chroma."

"He's alive, you know."

"I know," the Admiral said. "I know he's been alive for a long time. There was no body—that means he was alive."

"I chased him," Tommy said thickly. "Then I was captured."

The Admiral stared at him. "Have you heard of the *Mira*?" he asked.

"No," Tommy said truthfully.

The Admiral gave a small, sad smile. "It's not a very happy story, I'm afraid. But I think you'd like to hear it." Tommy inclined his head. "I was a Captain once. My best friends were—well, my entire crew were my best friends. But—but the people I knew the longest and trusted the most were my First Officer, my Chief Communications Officer, and my Chief Security Officer." The Admiral let out a small breath as if he were far away on his ship. "One day, our ship got infested. We realized that two of our crewmates were already dead and had been replaced with mirror-image copies—memories, talents, and looks were all the same, but they were going to kill us all."

"That sounds...terrible," Tommy admitted.

"It was," the Admiral said. "It was awful. I didn't know who to trust. My closest friends could have been my greatest enemies. And so in our state of unease, after my First Officer acted ominous when the power grid failed, we expelled him and my Chief Security Officer onto the nearest planet." Tommy's eyes widened. "It was the hardest decision of my life. It was also the wrong decision because we found the real...imposters a few days later and got rid of them. By then, three members were dead—not including the two that had been originally replaced—and two of my best friends were on an unknown planet."

"But...don't you know where they were?" Tommy asked.

"No," the Admiral said. "I looked. I looked for so long." He rubbed his face. "*We* looked. We—my Chief Communications Officer and I—we will live with the wrong decision for the rest of our lives. The navigation was shut down, so it never recorded where we exited warp to discharge them."

"I'm so sorry," Tommy said honestly.

"I am too," the Admiral said. "That was nearly three years ago, and I swore to hang up my badge and walk away." He snorted. "Of course, I'm an Admiral now...so what can you do?"

"And...they're dead?" Tommy said quietly.

"I think...if they could have come back, they would have," the Admiral said.

"What about your C.C.O.?"

"He searches, still," the Admiral admitted. "We both do, occasionally. It hurts to see each other—to see the entire crew. But we force the reunions, and they hurt every damn time. But we have to live with the wrong that we did...not by ignoring it." He closed his eyes. "This mission was strictly confidential. Nobody knows what happened—why I stepped down, or why two of the smartest people in the Galactic Rebellion stopped showing up to parties." Tommy let out a slow breath. "It's hard, sometimes. I see old acquaintances whispering in the halls, and they ask me—jokingly, of course—what secret mission two of my best friends are on."

"Why can't you just tell the public?" he asked.

"Because—" the Admiral laughed, but it wasn't one of humor. "Because there are more important things than the truth, Tommy. If the general public knows that monsters exist out there that can take the exact places of their friends—yet are murderers, aliens to the very core?" The Admiral shrugged. "Mass panic."

"And so you would lie to them?" Tommy said. "Keep the truth from them?"

"It was *not* my choice."

"But you are the Admiral."

"You will learn, Tommy," the male said, sounding tired. "That even if you seem like the top, there are always people ahead of you. I am *an* Admiral and head of the school and Earth as it is. I am, in the end, Human. But I am only a *Vice* Admiral. There are many people in Command above me. They decided to keep it secret—to keep the deaths of my best friends secret and have a private funeral where I could not invite everyone they've known except the current crew and immediate families. So that I have to *pretend*, when I hear their names, that somewhere out there, they are still alive and searching for useful information."

"So why not go off on your ship?" Tommy suggested. "Why retire and listen to these words?"

"Because every time I step on that ship, I am reminded of what I did," the Admiral said quietly. "And I cannot possibly go on a new ship—I am a *Captain*, or I was, anyway. We were a team. I...made poor decisions, and now I must pay for it." The Admiral steeped his fingers. "Every tough decision out there will have its downfalls. Had I not thrown two of my best friends off the ship, the imposters wouldn't have gotten cocky, and I bet my entire crew would have died, flown back to Command, and this entire Galactic Rebellion would be gone."

"So then you made the right decision," Tommy concluded.

"Yes," the Admiral said. "And unless I find another way, should I need to make that decision again, I *would*. I combed through every possible situation in my head. That was the only way that I've seen would have worked, accidental as it was."

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked weakly.

"Well, now you know something about me that nobody should know," the Admiral pointed out. "Now we both have dirt on each other." He smiled sharply. "But that's not the full point. I wanted you to realize that there is nothing you can do about the past except learn from it. Purpled had a long, arduous recovery. He still goes to therapy."

"I don't need therapy," he snapped.

"One day," the Admiral said. "You'll learn that blocking everything out just makes a worse build-up. You won't listen to me now—" Sure enough, Tommy was scowling. "—and maybe you're right. Maybe it will clear up. But should we capture Chroma, you will have to testify publically."

"Why?" he cried out. "Isn't there enough evidence?"

"Videos can be fakes," the Admiral said. "At least, that's what his attorney will argue. A first-hand witness—that is something they cannot contend with." He tilted his head. "Unless, of course, you don't want him to be put away forever?"

"Of course I do," Tommy snapped. "Why can't you just ask Purpled?"

"Because Purpled was delirious, and they could claim madness."

Tommy fell into silence. He hadn't realized that if the Galactic Rebellion ever recaptured Chroma, that he would have to testify. Some part of him wanted the Avian never to be found—and the other part of him immediately crushed that selfish, intrusive thought.

"You don't have to say anything now," the Admiral said. "In fact, when I registered you for your classes at Captain Philza's askance, I put your species as Human." He nodded, more to himself. "As your doctor is Nihachu—she volunteered, saying something about self-destructive teenagers—" the Admiral looked vaguely amused. "—you do not need to tell anyone the truth until you are ready."

"Really?" he said, his voice cracking.

"Yes," the Admiral said. "But know that it will come out sooner than later, and the longer you wait, the less it will be on your terms."

"Wait," Tommy said. "If you lied about my species—does that mean I'm not the only one left?"

"That information is classified," the Admiral said. Tommy's heart fell. "And while it is classified, you deserve to know something—so I must tell you this. Yes, you are the only Avian that walks this planet." Tommy deflated. "But that does not mean you—and Chroma—are the last Avians left."

His eyes widened. "You mean—there are others?"

"You think every Avian was aboard the *H.M.S Fran*?" the Admiral said, raising an eyebrow. "Your parents told you that, yes?" Tommy nodded. "They weren't lying to you, if you're wondering. They didn't know. Your species numbered few, and Avians work better in flocks—as you probably know." Like Elytrians.

"But why put us all in one space?" he demanded. "One that endangered us further in one swell swoop?"

"Like I said," the Admiral said. "Avians are stronger in groups." He shook his head. "I don't know much. Your people were very secretive."

Tommy threw up his hands. "Great, that's helpful," he muttered. "I would love to have a book on this stuff."

Inside, he giddily exclaimed, *I am not the last one left.*

I am not the last good one left.

"Sir?" he asked. "Can I ask a question?"

"That is a question, but go ahead."

"Why were the Avians hunted to extinction?"

The Admiral looked at him with sharp brown eyes. "Now that information *is* classified and something I cannot tell you."

"Why?" he asked desperately.

"Kid, the less you know about that mess, the better."

"But they're *my* species!"

"And you're not even graduated from Fleet school," the Admiral said sharply. "Maybe in a few years. It's not that I don't trust you with information; it's just that that sort of information is *extremely* volatile."

"For the Arachnids?"

"Yes."

Tommy sighed. "When I graduate, will you tell me?"

The Admiral smiled, standing up and walking around the desk. "Tell you what, kid. I'll tell you within three years." His eyes twinkled. "Something tells me that the crew of the *L'manburg* is going to swoop you up like they did the rest of the cadets on there."

Tommy blinked. "I still don't get how that's allowed."

"It's not," the Admiral admitted. "Quartermaster Purpled and Ensign Ranboo took online courses, and Ensigns Drista and Lani take a break when the crew goes on shore leave to come back here. Lieutenant Tubbo graduated super early—some think that the crew isn't good enough." The Admiral smirked. "The *L'manburg* has some of the best mission records I've ever seen, barring my own ship, of course."

"Of course," Tommy said, his own mouth twisting into a slight smirk.

"Captain Phil—pardon my language—doesn't give a shit about what other people think. I think he's setting a good example that it doesn't matter how old you are, only how good you are." The Admiral leaned closer. "And let me tell you, they are very good."

"And you think they're going to take me?" Tommy asked, confused.

"I think they would have if you had been a cadet."

"...why?" he asked.

"Well," the Admiral said, picking up Phil's letter of recommendation and reading through it. "Maybe it's because you have a '*selfless sense of skewed honor*,' or perhaps it's your '*brilliance on the field*,' or—this is a good one—it's because of your '*happiness when you see your friends, and what they remind you of—of happier times, of better people. I see his face sometimes when he thinks nobody is looking. It's broody, to say the least. I don't want to push or ask questions, but I know Tommy has seen things that no person—never mind a child—should ever see. I think that this kid is one of the best people that could ever graduate from Fleet and join one of our starships one day.*' " The Admiral looked up. "Phil doesn't say those things lightly, kid."

"He—he said that about me?" Tommy sputtered, now earnestly wishing he'd read the entire letter. Or even a little bit of it.

"Like I said," the Admiral grinned, reaching out and patting Tommy on the shoulder. Tommy was surprised to find that he didn't flinch at the touch, despite it being from someone he'd barely met. "The entire crew gets attached very quickly. It was a whole-ass custody fight after they picked up Purpled and Ranboo from Pogtopia. I even had a group of Ensigns down here, begging me not to take them away." The Admiral shook his head. "Not that I would have pulled Ensign Purpled away from his brothers, nor Ensign Ranboo away from the only person that he remembered."

"Thanks, I suppose," Tommy said.

The Admiral smiled. "No need to thank me. Just make sure that when you tell your new friends what actually happened that it's because *you* want to, not because time dictates you should."

Tommy swallowed and nodded. "Right. Let's go out to the sitting room. A few minutes ago, I got an alert that a few people entered."

Tommy frowned. "Why the fuck are more people here?" The Admiral raised an eyebrow. "Uh, pardon my language. Sir."

"It's fine, cadet," the Admiral said with some amusement. "You do have some reason to be surprised. But I will repeat this, for the final time. The crew of the *L'manburg* gets very, very attached."

"I'm pretty sure Techno hates me. Uh, Commander Techno...blade. Technoblade."

The Admiral sighed. "He does not hate you. In fact, if I were him, I think he would be interested in you. After all, it was your parents that sacrificed their lives so his people could live."

"He doesn't know that," Tommy pointed out.

The Admiral put one hand on the door and paused. "But you are still the single surviving crew member of the *H.M.S Fran*. The Piglins are debt-fulfilling people. He cannot repay anybody else, so he will repay you."

"I don't even know him!" Tommy cried out.

"I'm not saying how things should be; I'm saying how they *are*, Cadet Innes," the Admiral said, and Tommy let out a breath at the title. He was a cadet at Fleet school, despite not having taken the entrance exam.

"Are you sure I shouldn't take the—"

"Yes."

Tommy shut up. The Admiral smiled at him and pushed open the metal doors. Tommy blinked in surprise when he saw Tubbo, Purpled, and Ranboo in one corner, playing some kind of card game. Philza was still sitting in the chair, swiping through a datapad, one of his wings now curled around the wife that sat next to him, reading from a thin device, her lips pursed. Wilbur—why the Phantom had an old Terran instrument, he had no idea—but the lieutenant was strumming a guitar quietly, the notes floating in the silence of the quiet space. Techno leaned against the wall, an old-fashioned book in his hands. Tommy tilted his head curiously. Usually, books like that—especially ones that seemed to be on Ancient...he couldn't read that word...well, ancient stories. That meant it had to be written sometime around the twenty-first century—he would have expected that book to be in a museum or used for decoration, not as *reading* material.

The Admiral cleared his throat, and eight heads shot up to stare at him. There was a moment of silence, and Tommy saw—were they his friends, now?—the crew members of the *L'manburg*, clearly impatient, bite back their questions.

"He passed," the Admiral said.

"YES!" Tubbo screamed, and Tommy flinched. Philza whirled around and glared at the poor Shulker, who cringed. "Uh. Sorry, sir. Sirs, I mean."

"It is quite fine, lieutenant," the Admiral assured him. Tubbo let out a small breath of relief. "Kids will be kids."

"I'm so sorry, Admiral—" Philza started.

The Admiral held up a hand. "Your lieutenant was merely showing his delight that his friend got into the institution and could potentially join your crew—if you so wish—in the near future."

"Of course, Admiral," Phil said.

"I do not punish people for not being respectful around me," the Admiral continued. "I'm sure you've all heard about my old ship—the *Mira*, remember?"

"Oh, the classified one," Techno said, closing his book. Tommy blinked at him, glancing at the now-readable title. *Ancient Grecian Myths*. "Yeah, I have."

"Yes, Commander, the classified one," the Admiral said. "I suppose you know the stories by now."

"The ones where you spent four months convincing your entire crew to call you by your nickname and not your title?" Techno said.

"That one, yes." The Admiral inclined his head.

"The higher-ups hated you for that," Techno drawled.

"I believed in a better connection within the crew," the Admiral said.

Little good that did, Tommy thought sadly. He immediately hated that stupid idea. It was sort of harsh—although true.

"Anyway," the Admiral said. "Good luck at school, cadet." He paused by the doorway. "Oh, I also put him down as a Human. Just...as a little extra wall. Don't get him in trouble because I *will* plead plausible deniability if people find out he's an Avian and all roads lead back to me." Another small pause. "Happy belated birthday, Tommy."

Tommy watched as the office doors swung shut.

Tubbo talks about his marriage for the fiftieth time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Music can heal the wounds

that medicine cannot touch.

- Debasish Mridha

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, TOMMY!"

He clapped two hands over his ears as light plundered his eyes, hurting more than every retina scan or injury he'd ever had. He blinked again and saw nearly a dozen and a half people standing around a Victoria sponge cake, seventeen red and white candles burning. Tommy spun to see a proud-looking Tubbo next to him, the boy having instigated a conversation outside the door that the rest of the crew had filed through.

He hadn't even noticed that they'd left the hallway, too busy talking about cosmetology and the—current—popular theory that space-time could be superfluid. Apparently—it was split down the line—many physicists believed that while stars, galaxies, planets rotated, the universe itself did not. Tubbo, like many people, assumed that the universe was the same in every direction. *Rotation* itself required an axis, though general relativity could allow the universe to rotate. Assuming that the universe had a cosmic axis of rotation would make it seem like a particular direction of the universe—namely, down its axis. Superfluidity—the property of a fluid with zero viscosity that flowed without the loss of any kinetic energy; indefinite movement could apply to the universe in Tommy's argument. He reasoned that the lower the superfluid's viscosity, the more turbulent the fluid is—something commonly observed at the beginning of a black hole. After all, people had been searching for years for ways to get gravity to agree with quantum mechanics. And it *was* just a theory.

Anyway, it was safe to say that Tubbo had perfectly distracted Tommy enough for them to shout happy birthday.

And scare the shit out of him—not that anybody except Purpled saw his slight flinch. Perhaps Tubbo did as well because his eyes narrowed slightly, but the bright smile on Tommy's face deterred any evidence that he had cringed at the sudden yelling.

The past should stay in the past.

There were gifts too. Tommy blew out his candles—after making a wish—and he was surprised when he found out the crew had apparently gone and gotten him gifts. Some of them had apologized for not getting him something perfect, as they'd had short notice.

Tommy had admitted these were the first birthday gifts—minus the ones on the Red Planet—he'd gotten in seven years. He sat down and cried, Wilbur made fun of him, Tommy called him a bitch boy, and Niki threatened to stick him with a hypospray.

All in all, a great birthday party. And the first one he spent with something akin to a family; even in Pogtopia, there had been few of them, and they had always had a sense of foreboding.

Tubbo got him a stuffed cow that he named Henry. He made a big deal out of calling it a children's toy, but he tucked it under his arm and didn't let go. Later, in a dorm assigned to him by Fleet school—he was alone and didn't have a roommate; not that he cared—he put it on his bedside table and stroked the soft synthetic fur, smiling.

Niki got him a set of hyposprays. He rolled his eyes as she listed off the malady's they were supposed to cure—apparently it was because he hasn't gotten his vaccinations yet—and then when he was eating cake, she snuck up and used them one by one every time he looked away. He hissed at her every time as well and threatened to beat her up. She was, after all, only five feet and five inches. He was also terrified of her.

Techno got him a book—an actual book—labeled *The Myth of Theseus*. Apparently, it was a Greek myth, like the ones the half-Piglin had been reading in the sitting room waiting for Tommy. Tommy hugged it to his chest and tried not to cry. Books were damn expensive, and little did Techno know that this myth was his favorite one. Puffy used to read it to him when he was little, and she always said that Tommy reminded her of Theseus.

Phil's gift was a little more straightforward—it was his own datapad, for school, which he was glad for, and immediately created his own account and went around adding all the crew contacts. He pointedly avoided Wilbur and then added it when the Phantom wasn't looking. Phil also explained

that communicators like Tommy had used on Falir VI are military-grade, and even cadets like himself aren't allowed to use or carry them. Tommy resolved to steal one from the *L'manburg* when he could.

Purpled got him a butterfly knife, and Tommy smiled at him as he was reminded of the hot pink knife back on Pogtopia he'd used to cut apples. This one was pink as well, but it was made of shiny metal and folded up nicely.

Wilbur was thoughtful—perhaps more thoughtful than Tommy thought he was capable of—and instead of a joke book or something equally stupid, he handed Tommy two boxes of LED strips—something about twenty-first-century kids and decorating their room. Tommy had a bright grin on his face as he hugged them to his chest, resolving to put them up later that night. He did, eventually, and flicked between them on an ancient remote that doesn't work as fast as he wanted to—but he basked in the dark navy light, and he smiled into the near-darkness.

Ranboo got him three cans of frosting, and Tommy threw one at the Enderian's head.

In the same breath, Dream got him a booster seat, clapped him on the shoulders, and begged him to take the seat as the pilot. Apparently, they were missing a C.T.O and an official navigator, which explained the bridge's missing seats. Fortunately, they hadn't needed a C.T.O in the past missions, and Techno had been taking over navigation duties. Unlike other ships, Phil had been steady in saying they didn't need a navigator—Techno did the work of a navigator perfectly fine, as he had been one before he'd been promoted to First Officer by his captain. Tommy had taken out the knife Purpled had given him and stabbed the booster seat in front of Dream's eyes for good measure, throwing the Human the middle finger.

Drista was a bit more thoughtful than her idiotic older brother and teamed up with Lani to buy him a keyboard piano. He stared at her, shocked, and Purpled had admitted to telling them Tommy had once played piano, long ago. When asked how Purpled knew that, the magenta-eyed boy glanced at Tommy with a slight furrow and then went on to lie that Tommy had told him.

Which wasn't too far from the truth.

But Tommy had told him years and years ago and hadn't expected Purpled to *remember*. He knew he wouldn't play piano for a good while—it had been a long time—but his heart went out to the two girls he barely knew, who had gotten him an instrument after asking one of his friends.

"I didn't know you played piano," Tubbo told him as he put a hand on the plastic cover that encased the pretty thing after the two of them had lugged it into his dorm late that—well, it was morning now.

"I don't," he said. "Well, I *did*. I haven't played in half a decade." He doesn't say that his love of the piano died with his parents; he doesn't say that he turned to another instrument so he could ignore his past.

"I play piano," Tubbo told him; as Tommy withdrew the knife Purpled had gotten him to cut off the plastic casing.

It wasn't that he didn't want to play the piano.

He did. So badly. But every time he sat down and put his fingers on the keys, he was reminded of gentle hands over his as they taught him the notes. Every time he heard the notes, he was reminded of quiet laughter and hot apple cider and a better time and a naive child. Tommy stepped away and gestured towards a chair they'd pulled up from the tiny built-in kitchen.

"What?" Tubbo asked him. "Now?"

"Why not?" he said.

"It's your piano."

"And I'm so out of practice that I would sound like a dying cat," he said. "Besides, you said you play."

Tubbo smiled as he sat down, putting his hands on the newly uncovered piano keys. "There's a piano in the rec room on the *L'manburg*," he said, pausing. "Fundy plays it sometimes. I do too." Tommy nodded as Tubbo played the first notes of an unfamiliar song in the dorm room's LED-lit darkness.

He thought the two minutes that the Shulker played the song were two minutes he could forget everything that had happened to him. For those two minutes, he could hold his breath and pretend that things were only going to get better from here. For two minutes, he could close his eyes and pretend that everything was going to be okay.

When those two minutes were over, he felt emptier than he had before. He felt like something had come back and then left, creating a more significant gap as it ripped through his heart. He wiped the tears away from his face and twisted away as Tubbo smiled proudly, turning towards him.

"That was called Rosemary's Theme!" the Shulker said. "It's an old Terran song that was derived from a book."

"It's very pretty," he said, his voice cracking halfway through as he blinked to dispel the tears, glad of the darkness.

Tubbo was silent as Tommy stared at the unfamiliar walls of his doors. "You know," his friend said quietly. "I cried when I listened to it."

"Oh," he said.

"It's okay to cry," Tubbo said, and he felt an arm pat him awkward on his back as he breathed through his nose and told himself in the same breath that he shouldn't be crying. "It's okay, Tommy."

"It's not—the music," he said.

"I'm glad you think that my instrumental skills are bad enough that you tuned out and thought of someone else."

Tommy laughed wetly, turning to face Tubbo. He knew that the Shulker saw the tears shining on his face in the dim lighting, but there wasn't even pity—just understanding. "It's not you, I promise."

"I've heard that before," Tubbo assured him, the corner of his mouth twisting into something akin to a smirk. "It's not me; it's you, isn't it?"

"I—we're not in a relationship," he said, biting back the laughter.

"You're right," Tubbo said seriously. "I'm married to Ranboo. I think he would hate if I cheated on him."

"Didn't you guys get divorced?"

"Only officially," Tubbo said dreamily.

Tommy stared at him. "You're in love with Ranboo?" It wasn't that he believed that—he didn't; neither of them gave off that vibe—but he was just making sure.

"*What?*" Tubbo said, staring at him as if he'd grown a third leg. "No! What gave you that idea?"

"I don't know," Tommy said wryly. "Maybe it's because you talk about marrying him all the time."

Tubbo rolled his eyes. "We're in a platonic relationship, Tommy."

"Is this...platonic relationship...consensual?"

"He's fine with it," Tubbo said, pausing. "Sometimes."

"That's...helpful," Tommy said, glancing at the piano behind Tubbo and swallowing, the slight reprieve that he'd gotten withdrawing and releasing a flood of emotions.

Tubbo saw his look and smiled caringly. "The piano reminded you of something?"

"What?" he said, glancing at the shorter boy. "I dunno. I think it's PTSD or some shit."

"I could probably get Niki to diagnose—"

"No," he said firmly, louder than he probably should have. "I'm—it's fine, Tubbo. I think I was joking." Tubbo looked at him doubtfully. "It's—well, my dad used to teach me the piano."

"Sam?" Tubbo asked.

"No," he said sarcastically. "My other father. *Yes*, Sam." Tubbo rolled his eyes. "Anyway, I stopped playing after he died. For both obvious reasons and mental ones."

"You still remember the keys?"

"Yes," he said instantly. "It's not that I don't want to play. I do. But it hurts."

"Then don't play," Tubbo told him.

"But Lani and Drista—"

"Will *understand*," Tubbo said. He tilted his head. "How did Purpled know you played the piano?"

"I...told him," Tommy said. "Sort of. I just mentioned it in passing. It's not his fault." He did not mention that he didn't tell Purpled that he had switched instruments. There had only been two people who knew his current one—or at least, the one that he knew the best—and that one is full of bad memories as well.

He did not mention that the two people who knew he could play the instrument he had learned after his parent's death would never tell anyone again.

"Besides," he said. "It's the thought that counts." And...that was true. He's glad that Lani and Drista—and technically Purpled—contributed to getting him a piano, even if it gave him uncontrollable emotions.

Even after Tubbo is long gone, Tommy sat on the chair and placed his hands on the keys, just centimeters away from pressing down.

He couldn't bring himself to play a single note.

A single tear rolled down his face, and he watched as it plopped onto the new white keys, and he cried because he was weak.

Tommy got his schedule the next day. He had seven classes, one of which wasn't even supposed to be a class that he should take—Human history, taught to people who didn't come from Earth.

This would not be very pleasant. He was listed as a Human, after all.

He was pretty interested in the classes the Admiral had signed him up for—besides Human history—Survival Strategies—if only he'd had that on the Red Planet—Early Galactic Rebellion History—that one was mandatory, and Tommy knew he could pass that class if he slept through every one; thanks to his dad and aunt. There was also Advanced Subspace Geometry, which sounded interesting enough, Interspecies Protocol, Flight Control, and Basic Leadership.

Flight Control was an elective for the helmsman command path; he knew that much. Puffy had spoken of it with a fond look on her face, sometimes claiming that she enjoyed one-upping the males in her class that often told her that she would never be as good as them. Despite all her setbacks—despite the poor welcoming she had received, what with female Felines having a reputation of...well, as prostitutes. That had been a very long time ago and had been a horrible history that the Felines fought so hard to free themselves from...but the reputation existed, and so did the racials.

His aunt, after all, was not an Avian. Nor was she related to him by blood. That had never bothered him before, and it didn't now. Puffy had fought for her position through tears and blood and racism, and she had damn-well earned it. He knew that. Sam knew that. Their crew had known that.

And *that* was what mattered.

There were two Felines on the *L'manburg* that Tommy knew of, drawing up the mental list he had easily pulled off the public records. Dream's...not-boyfriend, George, and Harvey, who had temporarily replaced Tubbo on the bridge when they had been in prison.

And, of course, Techno, who was half-Piglin and half-Feline. Techno didn't bear the typical Feline traits—no ears or vertical pupils, but if Tommy didn't know better, he would say that Techno could probably, like all Felines, jump higher or perhaps have an easier time landing. He didn't know.

He sat in the back of his classes and waved at Lani and Drista when he saw they shared his second-period class, Survival Strategies. Drista also shared his Basic Leadership class, and Tommy quickly found out that Lani did not have that class, as she was not on the Command path, unlike him and the blonde-haired Human girl.

He also found out that there were way too many assholes in Fleet school. Even worse than Wilbur—and that was saying something because Wilbur was seriously annoying. Drista and Lani were decently well-known—they were, after all, the youngest to serve on a starship, with Lani's brother being the youngest *ever* to serve as a Lieutenant. He nearly punched a guy in the face after he said a snide comment about Tommy sleeping with one of them—fuck that guy, seriously—but saw the expression on Lani and spit in the guy's face instead.

"You should join track," Drista told him after he'd successfully outrun the guy through the hallways and to his final class, Basic Leadership. "You'd be good at it."

"Niki would kill me," he told her, only half-listening as their Elytrian teacher read out the term's knowledge objectives from the syllabus.

"She'd kill you if you did what you did in the gym," Drista pointed out. "I know Tubbo, being a Shulker, had to work hard to get on Varsity track." Shulkers exhausted quicker; something to do with the stamina of biologically being able to tap into that fourth-dimensional space. Perhaps he'd learn about that in Interspecies Protocol. "But—Avians were *made* to run."

"I think I was made to hide," he muttered, tapping his datapad against the desk.

"Thomas Michaels?"

It took him a while to glance up, as that was not his real name. Nor had it been the name that he'd gone under in Pogtopia—that would be too easy to connect; too easy to look at the name that was on the mural in the *L'manburg*—and no doubt elsewhere, as the names of the deceased were quite public. "Yes?"

"Were you paying attention, Mr. Michaels?"

"No," he said truthfully, and half the class snickered.

The teacher, a female Blazeborn with red hair and golden eyes, sighed. "Can you please name the ranks of the Galactic Rebellion?"

"Sure," he said. "The Admiral is the highest. Then comes the Rear Admiral, the Branch Admiral, the Vice-Admiral, the Commodore, the Fleet Captain, the Captain, Commander, Lieutenant Commander—"

"Mr. Michaels, you can stop right there," their teacher—he was pretty sure her name was Ms. Carpenter. "Did you study the class beforehand?"

He blinked, glancing at Drista nervously. The Human girl offered him an unreadable look. "Um...no, ma'am. This is my second day on Earth."

By now, he was cringing at his desk as the entire class was looking at him.

"You are Human?"

"...yes," he said. "But I was born on a spaceship. I've always wanted to go to Fleet school...so here we are." He didn't mention any of the in-between. He didn't mention his parents were dead; or that he was from the *H.M.S Fran* —even though he'd gotten the okay from the Admiral to say so. He'd spoken with the Vice-Admiral about the *H.M.S Fran* over a video call at breakfast. It was...interesting, to say the least.

The only thing he hadn't mentioned was the string of code because they had told him to trust nobody. And so he hadn't.

"And you, the Human girl next to Mr. Michaels?" Ms. Carpenter asked Drista sharply, who was smirking openly. "Can you name the rest of the ranks that Mr. Michaels so kindly started?"

"Sure," Drista said. "Where were we?"

"Lieutenant Commander," Tommy said.

"Right," Drista nodded. "Then comes Lieutenants, Junior Lieutenants, and then Ensigns. If you want to get into cadets, then comes Midshipmen, and then them." She waved her hand. "Cadets." Tommy noted she didn't include herself in the mixing.

"I suppose you grew up on a spaceship too?" Ms. Carpenter said disbelievingly.

"Ma'am, I am a Junior Tactical Officer aboard the *L'manburg*," Drista said evenly, not able to completely keep the arrogance out of her voice.

"You must be Drista, then." The blonde-haired Human inclined her head gracefully at the recognition. "Welcome back."

"Thanks."

Ms. Carpenter moved on to questioning other students, but Tommy noted the lingering glances that he and Drista both received. Still, that was to be expected, and he smiled as Lani and Drista met after class in the hallways.

"You coming to the *L'manburg* with us?" Lani asked him after hugging her friend.

"Is that allowed?" he asked dryly.

"We're part of the crew...what are they going to do, *not* let us on?"

"Fair point," Tommy said. "I don't know if they want me there, though."

"Don't worry," Drista said. "They do."

"Thanks," he muttered.

"Tommy's going to join track," Drista said, scowling at the older Elytrian who shoved her out of the way. Lani put a calming hand on her shoulder. "So he's not coming back to the ship right away."

"I *never* agreed to that," he argued.

"But you're going to do it," Drista said, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes.

"I—" he cut himself off. "...maybe."

"Great!" Lani said. "I'll tell Tubbo and the rest of them. The track is just outside—" she rattled off a bunch of directions that left his head spinning.

"You'll be the only...Human, probably," Drista said. "Listed officially, I mean."

He raised an eyebrow. "Do Humans not join track?"

"No," she said. "They do. Very occasionally. The problem lies in the fact that you're allowed to use your racial abilities. Not wings, though." Drista tilted her head. "That's why all of the long jumpers and pole vaulters are Felines."

"So..." he said. "Phantoms can just go into their Phantom state?"

"I mean...I suppose," Lani cut in doubtfully. "There's a no-harming-other-competitors rule—so for the Enderians, they can't just push people with their minds 'cause they feel like it. And I wouldn't see the point of using the Phantom state; it's not like it's any faster. Felines dominate that industry, like Merlings do swimming. There's a separate team for the Elytrians."

"Good to know," he said. "What about teleporting?"

"Ranboo can do that when he tries," Drista said. "I don't know if you knew this, but it's a scarce ability. And not one that would work in track, as it takes time for the particles to gather. Also, it's only short distances."

"I knew some of that," he muttered. He'd only seen Ranboo teleport twice—once because the Children's Rebellion members had wanted to see it, and once to get away from Tommy as he tried to feed him food. It wasn't like he could leak that he knew.

"See you after the meet, Tommy," Lani said with a bright smile as she pulled Drista away from a glaring cadet.

"Why does everyone hate you so much?" he called after them.

"Jealousy," Drista shouted, flipping off the next person that gave her a skeptical look that was more than just a cursory glance. "They're just envious I'm cooler than they are."

"That sounds like something I'd say," he muttered, as he turned and began making his way through the hallways, the stream of cadets growing less and less as he headed further into the school.

Eventually, after finding two dead ends and asking random teachers directions, he made his way outside to the back of Fleet school and to the track and soccer field. A conjugation of students had already gathered in the corner of the red-flecked track field in their customary blue uniforms that Tommy despised almost as much as he despised Wilbur. He plastered an amicable look on his face and wandered over there, feeling slightly out of place in the grouping. He noted that ninety percent of the students here were Felines; with their different-colored ears and vertical pupils, he also noted with surprise that there were a few Merlings there, two Enderians, a trio of Phantoms, and one other Human. They sneered at him when they saw him; already doubting his abilities with their petty racism—despite quite literally being on the planet designated and the origin of Humans.

Well, he was fucked.

He was also going to get top marks, even if it killed him.

Actually, if it did kill him, Niki would find some way to revive him, and he'd spend the rest of his days with hyposprays sticking out of his neck.

That almost made him debate not using his Avian biology, but...well, he wanted to win. He wanted to *be* the best. He *was* the best.

He was Tommy-fucking-Innes, and he would spit in their faces and see them on the finish line.

Chapter End Notes

helpful articles:

https://www.researchgate.net/post/If_Space-time_Were_a_Superfluid_Would_It_Unify_Physics#:~:text=Space%2Dtime%20is%20a%20Newtonian,star%20etc%20...

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/spacetime-might-superfluid-help-explain-gravity/>

Tommy-fucking-Innes kicked their fucking asses; that's what fucking happened.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

You may be the only person left

who believes in you,

but it's enough.

It takes just one star to pierce

the universe of darkness.

Never give up.

- Richelle E. Goodrich

"Right!" the head coach said, clapping his hands. His ears, vanilla with chocolate tips, flicked as the ghost of a breath of wind sped over the group. "Hope you all brought your running shoes because this term is going to go by quickly—you're old enough to know that we aren't going to teach you how to run, only get you to compete. I'm Coach Ant, but just call me Ant. This is the other coach—" The Feline with orange ears waved eagerly. "—Velvet, but he's my boyfriend, so don't hit on him." A smattering of laughter ran over the crowd. "Have any of you never been on a track team?"

Tommy raised his hand. He was the only one.

Ant rubbed his forehead. "Son, are you sure you should be here?"

"Yes," he said. "I ran track fields all the time back home." He didn't mention that *home* was a spaceship, but he recognized at least one person from his Survival Studies class—so they were bound to know. Not that they spoke up.

"Okay," Ant said, slight disbelief behind his tone. Tommy shrugged, uncaring of the Feline's opinion of him. It would change soon enough.

The coaches had them do a jog around the track, which was pleasant enough in the spring—though Tommy admitted that he had to draw on his abilities as an Avian to make the run; he *really* needed to train more—and he sort of relished the slight burn in his legs and the heaving in his lungs as he finished.

After that, they were sort of divided into groups based on the running they wanted to do—Tommy knew Niki would kill him if he did anything more than a hundred yards—she was probably going to kill him anyway. Still, he wanted as minor damage as possible from the Merling doctor.

There were about twelve students in his group, including the singular Human girl, who was shying away from a group of Felines that were laughing at her and muttering things.

"Hey," he said in greeting.

She glanced at him nervously. "Hi."

"I'm Tommy," he said. "You're Human too?"

She flinched as one of the Felines nearby shouted something derogatory that made Tommy glare at them. "Ignore the accent. Elytrian parents brought me up."

"Oh," he said. "That's pretty cool."

"Not when you're the only one that can't fly," she said with a sigh. "Anyway, that's why I joined Fleet school. Not that I'm trying to put my whole life story on you."

"You seem nicer than those dickheads," he said, raising his voice so they could hear as the group watched the tryouts of the four-hundred-yard runners.

"I—I suppose." She smiled at him, her blue eyes more like the sky than the ocean, as Tubbo's was.

"What's your name?"

"Sni'yfyer'ich."

"*What?*" he asked.

"Sni'yfyer'ich," she repeated, a slight hesitation in her gaze. "It's Elytrian for '*fallen angel*'."

"Ah," he said, trying to make sense of the nonsensical word. "I'm going to call you Sniff."

"...why?"

"Because I can't pronounce your name," he admitted.

She shrugged, adjusting her headband in her hair. "Fine with me. It's better than the name-calling that I get in class."

"They're assholes," he said stoutly. "Ignore them."

"That's...not quite how it works."

"Then go deaf," he told her. Sniff laughed in disbelief, covering her mouth slightly and falling silent as the students around them turned to look at the duo. "Why are you giving me that look?"

"I'm not going to give myself a *disability*."

"Why not?"

Sniff paused, amusement in her sky-blue eyes. "Because that would make things more difficult." Her shoulders shifted, as if she imagined something behind her.

"But you could ignore bullies," he protested. "You could—not get the procedure to fix your ears and just go around with a remote control and turn off your hearing aids when you feel like it."

"That seems counter-productive."

"It would be epic."

"Mr. Michaels, and Ms..." Velvet trailed off as he glanced down at the clipboard.

"Sniff," she said, glancing at Tommy, who inclined his head. "I go by Sniff."

"That's such a fucking stupid name," the Feline next to Tommy snorted.

"And your name is fucking *Jacob*," he retorted, as Sniff looked at her feet, quiet. "Imagine being your parents and *not* having an abortion—and then naming their bitch of a child Jacob?" He shook his head. "Couldn't be my parents. My parents actually had some self-worth."

"You—!" the Feline snarled, looking slightly surprised that Tommy knew his name. Of course, he'd nearly been hit by a basketball thrown from one of *Jacob's* friends, so he did know the asshole's name.

"Now, now," Velvet said, hiding a smirk behind his clipboard. Tommy liked him immediately. "No arguing. We want to be a team here, after all."

Jacob crossed his arms. "I don't want to be on a team with him, Coach. I doubt he could even make junior Varsity."

"Oh, yeah?" he snarled. "Try me, fucker."

"Oh, you wanna go?"

"No, I want to beat you." Tommy paused. "And I *am* going to beat you, you turtle fuck."

"What's wrong with turtles?" Sniff asked.

He glanced at her. "They're slow and green."

"What's wrong with being slow and green?" the girl responded, her lips twisting slightly as she held back her smirk.

"Everything," he hissed. "Green is the worst color—it's like, the color of vomit and grass and trees."

"...don't plants give you oxygen?"

"Stop questioning me!" he snapped.

"O-kay," Velvet said, interrupting with what was definitely a smirk on his face. Jacob had a dumbstruck look on his face, and the rest of the group was dead silent. Sniff subsided with a funny look on her face. Tommy stuck out his tongue at her. "We're just going to proceed with tryouts...seeing as the rest of the groups are done." Tommy glanced behind him and realized that, yeah, the rest of the groups were watching his. "I need you to line up in groups of two. The first will race, and then the second. Since you'll be racing a hundred yards, we'll have a breather, and then you'll do it again in the same order. Got it?"

Wordlessly, Tommy moved to the back of the line, at position four, and after a second, Sniff moved into group two at position five. Jacob sneered at him and pushed one of his buddies ahead of him, jostling Tommy slightly.

"You think you're so great, huh?" the Feline said.

"I *know* I'm great," Tommy told him. "It's only a matter of proving it."

"You're such a fucking smartass."

"I'm brilliant," he said, a quick grin filling his face. People like Jacob didn't particularly bother him, though he wasn't one to judge when other people were bothered by their behavior. Tommy took a quick word from his excellent buddy Wilbur Soot. "I've heard worse from better people." Wilbur had been joking when he'd said it; Tommy said it matter-of-fact and straightforward with no hint of sarcasm.

He had a feeling that Jacob would have punched him in the face had they not been around a group of people. Instead, Jacob snarled in his face—he thought that Felines were more the Terran equivalent of a *cat*, not a fucking dog—and Tommy grinned brightly, rolling his eyes.

Oh, he knew how to—what was the Human saying?—press people's buttons.

"You're *dead*."

"And you're a bitch," he said, watching as the first group reached the finish line. Sniff looked slightly nervous as she approached the white line, Velvet standing there slightly imposingly, Ant waiting at the finish line with his own clipboard.

"Must you antagonize him?" Sniff hissed under her breath as she put her hands on the track.

"It's not my fault his mother didn't swallow when she had the chance."

"Please refrain from talking as we approach the start of the match, Mr. Michaels," Velvet drawled, unable to keep the amusement out of his voice.

Jacob looked halfway between wanting to strangle Tommy and just—well, just shocked. "Coach, he insulted my family!"

"What?" Velvet said, raising a scarlet eyebrow, his red fox ears twitching. "Can't take it? Come on, *Jacob*. You're nineteen. Tommy here is seventeen by a week. You're taller than him and more muscular. If you're so keen to show off, then *beat him* in this run." As his eyes ran over the six in the group—four of them deadly quiet—Tommy could have sworn that Velvet winked at him. "I'm your coach, not your protector. You can damn well do that yourself. Now, are you ready?" It was a rhetorical question, and for once, Tommy kept his mouth shut. "Good. Three. Two. One. *Go*."

Tommy drew on his Avian self, felt the smirk grow on his face, and fucking *ran*.

Tommy (Big Man)

↳ *how the fuck am I supposed to get up there????*

fucking guard says that I need a pass

Tubbo, I don't have a pass

get me a fucking pass

Tubbo

↳ *yeesh, I told them to let you up*

Tommy (Big Man)

↳ *how, exactly, did you describe me?*

Tubbo

↳ *I didn't; I had Wilbur do it because I was busy*

Tommy (Big Man)

↳ *...fuck.*

Tubbo

↳ ???

Tommy (Big Man)

↳ *HE WON'T LET ME INTO THE FUCKING TRANSPORT ROOM*

I DON'T UNDERSTAND

FUCKING LET ME INNNNNNNNNNNNN

Tubbo

↳ *I'll have Quackity give security a call.*

Also, I seriously gotta ask Wilbur what he made your description...?

Tommy (Big Man)

↳ *Gremlin child. My description was fucking GREMLIN CHILD*

I'M GOING TO FUCKING KILL THE DICKHEAD

PUSSY

BITCH

Tubbo

↳ *Okay, Tommy.*

Whatever you say

He collapsed in the captain's chair with a theatrical groan, rubbing his face and sliding down until his spine was half bent over.

"Out," Philza told him, but there was no malice in his voice.

"How'd you get on the ship?" Wilbur demanded.

"No fucking thanks to you," he muttered, rubbing his face. "I got a pass, though." He held up an ID card. "Also, no fucking thanks to you guys." The transport had been fun to ride—about a ten-minute trip from Earth's surface to the space station the *L'manburg* was docked at and meeting Tubbo there so he could get his ID.

"Drista told me you tried out for the track team," Dream said, spinning around in his own chair. "How'd it go?"

"Oh, you did?" Techno said, suddenly interested.

"Yeah, *son*, how did your first day of school go?" Philza said with a slight mocking smirk.

"Terrible," he muttered. "All they did was talk about syllabuses and shit that I already knew."

"Drista also said you were a smartass in Basic Leadership," Dream continued.

Tommy groaned. "It's not my fault they asked me a question that I already knew the answer to." He paused. "Besides, she was too. She finished the answer after the teacher interrupted me."

"Of course she left that out," the blonde-haired Human muttered.

"Back to the topic at hand," Phil said, amusement in his voice. "How'd track go? Did you do good?"

"GOOD?!" Tubbo said, bursting through the door as the elevator arrived on the floor of the bridge. "Look at this!" He shoved his datapad into Phil's arms, and Tommy groaned again, staring at the white lights of the ceiling.

"What the hell," Phil said flatly.

Techno plucked the datapad right out of his grip, the half-Piglin—for some reason—curious about the whole endeavor. He paused and then squinted, rereading it. "Heh. You made the top spot on Varsity."

"Oh, Niki's gonna kill you," Wilbur said happily.

Tommy pointed an accusing finger at him. "Don't you fucking tell her. It wasn't in my original plan, but fucking *Jacob* decided to bully this woman friend that I made—and then I insulted his mother, but that's not important—so I beat him. Unfortunately, he was faster than I expected, so I had to use my amazing Avian-ness to win."

"His name is Jacob?" Wilbur said in disbelief. "Wow. I feel sorry for him. What kind of parents would ever do that to a poor kid? That's like asking for an asshole of a kid."

"That's what I said!" Tommy exclaimed. "He took it personally, for some reason."

"Gee," Phil said dryly, handing the datapad back to an ecstatic Tubbo with a careful hand, his wings shuffling slightly. "I wonder why." He crooked a finger at Tommy. "Out of my chair, mate."

Tommy gave another theatrical groan, dragging himself out of the chair and onto the floor. He lay there as Phil took his seat in the chair, amusement written all over the captain's face. "I'm dying."

"Why?" Techno said, in such a bored tone that Dream cackled.

"Because my parents are dead," he groaned, throwing an arm over his face. He sat up in the awkward silence, finding five pairs of eyes on him in various portions of pity. "That's not what I meant. I meant that nobody could sign my syllabus forms."

"That's...not quite true," Phil said after a moment, swallowing awkwardly. "I'm signed off as your temporary guardian."

"You are?" he asked, keeping the lightheartedness in his voice and the darkness out. He...did not know why Phil did that. Why he'd ever want someone as broken as *Tommy* in his custody.

"Yeah, mate," Phil said, and Techno frowned at him. Wilbur just looked curious. "You said you have something for me to sign?"

Tommy unhooked the datapad from his belt and chucked it at the captain. Philza caught it with a deft hand, raising an eyebrow at him as he swiped through the seven different papers. "You're in Interspecies Protocol?"

Tommy opened his mouth to answer, but Wilbur beat him to it. "Maybe he'll learn some respect in that class."

"*Fuck* you—"

"Not likely, though," the Phantom continued, drawling the last words as he flipped Tommy off.

"Wil," Phil said, not looking up from where he was signing off the first of seven papers with his finger.

"Gremlin child," Wilbur finished.

"Don't you have some transmissions to elucidate?" Dream asked.

"I still don't understand why there are *seven* Argustine dialects—!"

"Get to it, then, nerd," Techno drawled, and Wilbur leveled a slight glare at him, no real heat behind it. The Phantom threw up his hands and turned his chair around, muttering some choice words under his breath that the bridge pretended not to hear.

"Why are you on the floor, Tommy?" Tubbo sighed, leaning over Tommy's face and blocking the light.

"I'm dying," he told the boy thoughtfully.

"You should go see Niki—"

"ABSOLUTELY NOT—"

He ended up seeing Niki anyway. The doctor was *not* happy that he joined track, never mind the fact he'd used his abilities to beat a bully. Fortunately, after his daily dosage of anti-golden-apples, Niki let him off with a warning not to hurt himself.

He intended to keep that promise.

He ended up not.

It wasn't even his fault.

Really, it wasn't.

Ask anyone!

("It was your fault," Sniff told him later.)

"It was definitely your fault," Wilbur said, eyes furrowed with worry as he tapped his fingers on the side of Tommy's medical bed. "Just—be careful? Please? You had us worried."

"Tommy..." Tubbo said, his brown eyes sad.

"What the fuck, mate," Phil said flatly.

"You should have fought back," Techno told him, eyes narrowed. If Tommy didn't know better, he would have said the half-Piglin was angry. Not at *Tommy*, but at...someone else.

Of course, he didn't know better.

"I couldn't," he told them, time and time again. "I—I couldn't."

And...maybe that was a lie.

It was a week later that the incident occurred that left Tommy in that horrific medical state.

It was a typical day after track practice. Ant and Velvet loved Tommy—more so than they ever had Jacob—and Tommy made sure to rub that in the Feline's face. Which, looking back, was a terrible idea. Tommy was chock-full of terrible ideas.

What started as an insult-flung competition turned into a fight.

It wasn't really a fight. Tommy reviewed the security footage and hated every moment of it. Still, he'd *had* to because he couldn't remember it in person—memories overwhelmed him when Jacob's fist came flying at his face, and he wasn't strong enough to take it.

"TOMMY!"

Ant and Red were somewhere else, he didn't know, but Sniff's scream of pure terror got them coming—yet they were too late, and Tommy was Tommy, and he was lost in his damn nightmares, and he was too weak—but he'd always been too weak, too stupid to save them, too dumb and small to fight back.

He'd learned to take it in the prison, and so he lay on the ground with blood on his face and *took* the blows and kicks to his ribs as Sniff, bless her, tugged at Jacob's arm and screamed profanities with all she could muster.

She didn't do much, but it was the thought that counted, and it was her screams that ended the one-sided brawl.

Tommy didn't really...remember that. He remembered the pain and the feeling of Jacob's foot slamming into his ribs and white-hot pain filling him; he remembered the fists against his face and the sound of his nose breaking; he remembered squeezing his eyes shut and lifting his arms over his head and sobbing like the fucking coward he was as the foot slammed into his chest *again and again and again*—

He remembered it stopping, and he remembered medics there, and he remembered something being shoved over his mouth because holy fuck, Jacob had broken his ribs, and one of them had punctured his lung, and he had nearly *died*. He remembered staring up at the bright lights and masked doctors and just lying there, wondering if this was where it ended.

Sort of...wishing this was it.

He had watched his friends die, and so his story should end here. It was only humane, right?

He fell unconscious a few times and woke up to Wilbur screaming obscenities and Tubbo shouting something as well and wanting to yell at them to be fucking *quiet* so that he could die in peace. Still, perhaps he'd said that out loud because everything went deathly silent, and he was standing in a tunnel of blackness with light at the end.

And it was calm there.

It was peaceful.

And Tommy thought, *this is where I die*.

And he wasn't strictly opposed to that idea, either, and that was what hurt him the most.

But it wasn't. It wasn't, because he stood there waiting and he could have sworn there were five figures there; three teenagers and two adults, and he *knew* their identities—but the miracles of modern medicine brought him back, and he felt the electricity arc through his chest as his heart beat once more, and the thought—

—*I want this to end.*

This...pain. This constant state of living with the memories of everything he had ever experienced, like Atlas from Techno's book of Greek Myths. He felt like he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, and he wanted it just to *drop* it and let it flatten fucking everything.

He didn't want to carry the memories of an Avian with gas-colored hair and a brilliant, lying smile of teeth and misleading love. He didn't want to carry the empty bonds of his parents and aunt, who had been his *world* for ten years. He didn't want the pressure of being the only fucking one in the whole fucking universe who knew the full story of the Children's Rebellion and the Red Planet. He didn't want to be the last surviving child Avian that was known—fuck the Admiral, anyway. He didn't want to be the only living crew member of the *H.M.S Fran*—he didn't, hadn't *ever* wanted any of this.

He got it all anyway, and it fucking hurt every step of the way.

But Tommy picked himself up. He pushed his problems aside, and he got up with a bounding step and a grin on his face, and he pretended that the reason his heart failed three times was not because he had willed it to. He pretended that he wanted to be here, wandering on the *L'manburg*, doing his homework—joking with Wilbur, rolling his eyes as Tubbo facetiously flirted with Ranboo, beaming as Purpled showed him something new—and he pretended that everything was okay.

Eventually, that thin band would snap, and Tommy wouldn't ever be able to sew it together again.

But that time is not now, and so for the time being, he is okay.

He opened his eyes to a beeping heart monitor and dim lighting.

Tommy groaned, feeling as if he'd gotten run over by a train, and he sat up, noting the IV in his arm and the pulse oximeter on his middle finger. He blinked, like there were rocks attached to his eyelids, and he knew that he *should*, medically, be in more pain, but if the used hyposprays piled on a cart said anything, it was that he was as high on painkillers as an addict was on heroin.

He tilted his head as he glanced down at his body. If the throbbing in his eyes meant anything, it was probably that he had some black eyes. And stitches in his forehead and his nose fucking hurt—well, he'd broken that.

He wondered why they hadn't used the regenerator on him yet.

He shouldn't have a cast around his wrist, and his leg *shouldn't* be elevated—he should have a bone knitter in here, and sure enough, glancing around, it's abandoned in the corner—but why his leg is still healing confounded him.

Surely Niki wouldn't put him through this much pain on purpose?

The office door burst open and said Merling is standing there in her pink-haired glory, breathing hard.

"Oh my God, you're awake," she said, and Tommy blinked at her, lips thick. Niki slammed her hand on a red button by her door, and Tommy cringed as the lights started to flash, wincing from the pain. She saw his look, pursed her lips, and then pressed it again.

Thankfully, the light stopped.

"'M I 'posed to be 'nythin' else?" he slurred.

"Yeah," Niki said. "You should be dead."

"D'you wan' me ta be?"

"What—no!" Niki exclaimed. "Of course not, Tommy! Why would you—why would you say that?"

He tilted his head, thinking. "Dunno."

Lani came bursting through the door, her eyes wide, and Ranboo followed shortly after.

"You're awake," Tubbo's sister breathed out, relief painting her face. "I thought—we thought we were going to lose you."

"Nearly did," Ranboo admitted.

Tommy blinked slowly. "Wha—wha 'appened?"

Niki tapped her fingers on the metal table for attention. "You—your heart stopped," she said, not really looking very professional at the moment. At that moment, Tommy saw the dark circles under her eyes and wondered how long it had been. "Three times. We thought—we didn't know if you'd make it."

"Why?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Ponk is running tests...but I don't know. We don't know. *Nobody* in the Fleet knows." Tommy had a horrible inkling of an idea, but he doesn't say it out loud. "I—every time we tried to use the regenerator or the—or *any* tech, your heart would stop, and we'd be forced to revive you."

"It was horrible," Lani said, with tears in her eyes.

"We watched you die," Ranboo said, blinking at him with his heterochromatic eyes. His voice shook slightly—thought people who didn't know him that well wouldn't have noticed. Tommy wasn't supposed to know him that properly, but...well.

And maybe...maybe he wanted to die, but that inkling of doubt trickling in made Tommy question everything—*did he*? Did he really?

Maybe.

That scared him more than anything.

Chapter End Notes

ay Tommy nearly died again! The angst is starting soon...

(plz give me kudos)

Back On Track...And Into a Trap.

This is where the fun begins.

- Anikin Skywalker & Ahsoka Tano

When they next used the regenerator on him, it worked with little fanfare, though Tommy was afraid his heart would stop.

(Was he?)

It didn't, and Ponk, though he had a few theories, never figured out why they hadn't been able to use medicinal technology while he had been unconscious.

Speaking of being unconscious, apparently, he'd been out for three days. And despite modern medicine being a thing, because of the...occurrences, they hadn't been sure whether he'd live or not.

"You had a moderate concussion, a cracked cranium, four broken ribs, a shattered femoral shaft, a fractured wrist in your left hand, a cracked one in your right, and hemorrhage, briefly, before we treated that," Niki told him, looking slightly affronted when he'd asked. He sat on the edge of his medical cot and twisted his wrist slightly, glad they had things to help him—otherwise, he might have been injured for six months or more.

It was also Tubbo, unsurprisingly, who was the first one to visit him, the brown-haired Shulker bursting into the room and screaming about how his husband had told him that a certain Avian was actually awake. Niki told him to shut up, and Tommy cracked a weak grin.

"You look like shit," Tubbo told him quietly. It turned out they were at the Fleet hospital, which made a lot of sense. The alarms that Niki had pressed had led to her assistants' bracelets—Lani and Ranboo and Ponk, who were staying on Terra for the time being.

"Thanks," he said dryly.

"Seriously," Tubbo said seriously. "The aftermath of that fucking Feline was terrible." He wrinkled his nose. "We were up on the bridge, talking, and suddenly we get a call—and it's an emergency—so of course we think it's a mission, and then it's Fleet school, and they're fucking telling us that your heart keeps *failing*."

"I'm...sorry?" he tried.

Tubbo waved a hand at him. "Not your fault." Tommy didn't have the heart to tell him it might be. "So we rush down there, and it's a *huge* mess—apparently Niki was notified first, and Lani is rushing around grabbing things, and Ranboo is there as well, and every time they use the regenerator or the bone knitter on you, your heart fails—"

"—and I'm pressing my hand against the glass and wondering if this stupid gremlin child I knew was going to die," Wilbur continued, hands in his lap. Tommy frowned, wondering if he'd always cared like that. "Seriously, Tommy. You were in *manual* surgery for seventeen hours. There were only four qualified medical officers who knew how to do manual surgery."

"Including Niki?"

"Of course," Wilbur scoffed. "Niki knows everything."

"I can't imagine how you felt," Purpled told him as Tommy spooned cocoa puffs into his mouth.

He glanced up, swallowing. "What?"

"How you felt," Purpled said sadly, bumping Tommy's shoulder. Fortunately, they were alone, for once. "When you watched them die."

"Oh," he said.

Purpled gave him *that look*, and Tommy didn't like that look. "Was it..." he trailed off as they finally started to breach an area that Tommy never thought he'd have to talk about again. "Was it easy, at least?"

"To watch them die?" Tommy snorted. "Never."

"No," Purpled said. "Their deaths. Was it fast?"

"Yes," he told the Human. "In an instant."

"I'm glad that it wasn't painful," Purpled said with a sad smile.

"Did you not watch the executions videos?" he asked, tilting his head.

"I—did," Purpled admitted. "But—but hearing firsthand, from you, was far better than any of those black and white grainy moving images ever were." Tommy was silent for a moment, contemplating that. "When I saw you were back, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was—it was everything I had ever imagined, but you have this permanent cloud about your head that I don't think anybody else sees because they didn't know you...before."

"Before Pogtopia," he muttered.

"Yes," Purpled said. "Before Chroma." He paused. "It—living with...this has never been easy, and then I stood with Wilbur and Tubbo and Techno and Phil and your track friend, I can't pronounce her name, and all the others you'd met aboard the *L'manburg*, and I watched Niki with the defibrillator, and Ranboo and Lani were removed from the room because they couldn't be professional enough—"

"—emotionally compromised," Tommy said.

"—and we watched your heart fail three times, and we held our breaths and prayed that you would come back to us," Purpled said, and Tommy realized that the magenta-eyed Human boy was crying. "It was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I don't think any of us got very much rest that night, or the next night, even when the doctors said you were stabilized." He reached over and hugged Tommy's shoulders quickly. "I—watching you die was one of the worst things I've ever seen," Purpled said quietly. "And that *moment*, that horrible moment where she removed the pads from your chest, and we had to pray to whatever universal being exists that you would breathe again—to stand there, helpless—I will say, without a doubt, that that was *the* hardest thing I've ever done."

"Why didn't you fight back?" Techno asked him.

Tommy glanced at the pink-haired half-Piglin. "I—what?"

"I watched the security footage," Techno told him. "You didn't fight back." He gestured at the room. "Half of this could have been avoided had you fought back. You wouldn't have nearly—nearly died three times." Tommy was surprised at the small break in the commander's voice—he hadn't known that Techno had cared that much. "You didn't even try. Sniff tried harder than you."

"Sniff?" he asked.

"Yeah, your friend, nerd," Techno snorted, glancing away. "The one that Elytrian parents brought up." Tommy frowned. "Phil recognized the name." Ah, that made more sense. "You just...lay there and took it."

"So what?" he said. "Now he can't claim self-defense."

"And you could be dead."

"So what?" he spat out, and Techno recoiled, looking horrified.

The half-Piglin stalked out, and Tommy did not feel sorry in the slightest, though he was regretful that he'd said that out loud for someone to hear.

Phil sat down carefully on the bed as Tommy swiped through his datapad, reading an article on wormholes. It was pretty enjoyable, really.

"Mate—" Phil started.

"The theory of general relativity could support the existence of wormholes or bridges through space," Tommy interrupted, not particularly keen on having a conversation with his guardian. He was still in the medbay—*L'manburg's* medbay, this time, even though he'd been cleared from the Fleet hospital. Drista and Lani had explained what happened in classes when he was gone—and he'd been happy to know that Jacob had gotten expelled, unable even to claim self-defense, since Tommy hadn't started it nor fought back.

"Mate, Tommy," Phil said warningly. Tommy sighed and turned off his datapad. "We need to talk."

"We *are* talking," he said warily.

"No," Phil said. "*Talk*. About what happened."

"Jacob beat the shit out of me is what happened," he snorted. "I was antagonizing him. I sort of deserved it."

"Nobody deserves that," Phil said in a near-snarl, and Tommy glanced at him, surprised. Huh. Perhaps these guys actually cared. "Also, Techno told me what you said. Did you really mean that?"

Tommy thought about his words that he'd said to Phil's First Officer. "No," he said finally, and it was only half the truth. "I didn't mean it."

"Good," Phil said, though he didn't sound like he completely believed him. "But that's beside the point. My *point* is that you're extremely indifferent to the situation at hand."

"Believe it or not, Phil," Tommy smirked. "I've been through worse."

"That is *not* comforting."

"I know, I'm so great," he snarked. "But seriously, it's fine. I'm fine." To clarify, he was never fine. But he was dealing with it—see: *neglecting* it—and so he was as fine as he had ever been. Perhaps a bit more aware.

"It...that's not particularly how it works," Phil said. "I'm just here to tell you something."

"What?" he said warily.

"There was a distress call, and Command is sending the *L'manburg* to check it out," Phil said, and Tommy felt a pang in his heart. "We ship out in four hours."

Well, fuck.

Sniff brought him a bag of jellybeans and a note from his coaches to get well. Tommy huffed in his dorm room as he let her in. He'd refused to watch the *L'manburg* leave *or* say goodbye to anybody but Phil, though he'd got some messages on his datapad. Drista and Lani were left behind as well—they were in a terrible mood too.

"I'm glad you're awake," the Human told him as he munched on the strawberry and blueberry candies and contemplated blocking Tubbo—the Shulker boy had sent him messages that he hadn't read. "That was scary."

"Thanks for getting help," he told her warily.

Sniff smiled as she curled up in the only chair that he wasn't using. She had her supplies—a drawing notebook and a bag of paints and pens and other drawing materials he didn't understand. "It's nothing," she told him. "Captain Philza was very nice."

He tilted his head. "Because he's an Elytrian?"

"I—well, I suppose," Sniff said. "Apparently he's heard of my parents, seeing as they work at diplomatic negotiations from Elytra's side. He told me to follow my dreams." She sighed. "Think he'll accept my application on the *L'manburg* when I graduate?"

"Of course," Tommy told her sincerely. "You technically did save my life."

Sniff gave him that *look* but drew out her Copic markers and started coloring in her sketch. Tommy didn't really know her techniques; he wasn't an artist by any means.

He was just glad she was one of the only ones asking him why he hadn't fought back. She'd been there, too. Unlike the rest of his...whatever they were, she'd *seen* his face. But she didn't ask questions, just sat and drew while he munched on jellybeans.

"This is shit," he declared, after around three minutes of silence.

"What, the jellybeans?" Sniff asked him, glancing up, her blonde eyebrows furrowed. "I can get different—"

"Don't touch my candy," he said. Sniff gave a small coughing laugh as he huddled protectively over his candy. "No, I meant this situation."

"Like...Jacob?" Sniff asked hesitantly. "You know he's expelled, right?"

"No," he said. "The *L'manburg* leaving."

"It was a distress call, Tommy," Sniff said patiently. "When you wouldn't answer your messages, Captain Philza messaged me." She looked slightly in awe. "*The* Captain Philza!"

"Yeah, you can stop simping now," he told her. "Trust me; he's just old."

"But he's *the* Philza Minecraft!"

"Fair enough," he sighed. "Phil is basically just the best man ever, but that's beside the point. The *point* is they left me!"

"Um...you're not part of the crew...?" Sniff told him.

He huffed. "I should be."

"Maybe, but they also left Lani and Drista," the Human girl said diplomatically. "And those two are actually part of the crew."

"Thanks for your pity."

"You're welcome."

"How's track going?" Tommy asked, changing the subject.

"Huh?" Sniff said. "Oh, it's going fine." She paused, switching out one of her markers. "We talked about jealousy and stuff. Ant and Velvet were worried about you." Tommy, glancing at the get-well card on his beside, made a slight noise of agreement. "We had a few practices. Our first meet isn't for a week or so...and you're still the top spot by a mile." She tilted her head. "You're really fast."

"Of course I am," Tommy said, reaching over and grabbing his datapad. He powered it on before continuing his conversation. "I'm Tommy-fucking-Michaels." He *almost* slipped up on that last word but slipped in the fake last name. "I'm the greatest, most amazing person in existence."

"Of course, Tommy," Sniff said, amused, as she bent further over her drawing and added some line art with a black pen.

"Some would call me the coolest person in the entire universe—" he cut himself off as he saw Tubbo's messages. Sniff frowned at him, but Tommy was too busy reading them to pay attention to her.

Tubbo

↳ *Hey, Tommy*

Phil told me you weren't responding to messages :(

That's okay

I get it; you're mad

:(

Ranboo says hi

The ship is taking off

Wilbur says that he misses you

oops apparently, I wasn't supposed to say that

Tubbo

↳ *We're getting far away now*

About to be out of messaging contact

at least, datapad to datapad

technology is pretty cool :D

anyway

I thought you might like this

It's a picture of a bee!!!!!!

↳ ***<File Attatched>***

↳ *oh wait, that's not a bee*

ahahaha

uh that's the mission debriefing

ignore that lol

:>

don't tell Phil I accidentally sent that

he'd be mad

D:

anyway, here's the bee

↳ *<Image Attatched>*

↳ *cute, isn't it?*

Tommy, we're leaving message range :(

I miss you

is that stupid???

oh well

see ya in a week or so

depending on how the mission goes

Phil says it's one of those boring ones

>:(

bye Tommy

No.

No fucking way.

No way in fucking *hell*. It—this—NO.

He clicked off Tubbo's message and pushed himself off the bed, sprinting to the doorway. He remembered Sniff after a second, his hand on the door handle.

She looked confused.

He hesitated. "I—I have to save my ship," he admitted.

Sniff stood up, her eyes wide. "Is it in danger?" she said.

"Yes," he said. "And—and they're in warp four and are out of the contact zone—not to mention that nobody is gonna believe me—I gotta go, Sniff."

"Okay," she said and reached into her pocket and withdrew a set of keys. He caught them offhandedly, frowning at them. "That's my ship."

"You have a *ship*?"

"My parents bought it for me for my eighteenth birthday," Sniff explained. "I'm not much of a pilot...but I believe you. *Go*."

"Okay," he said and opened the door. "I—thank you."

She smiled at him. "Go!"

He left, sprinting down the hallway with the ship's engine keys firmly in his hands. The stairway pounded as he walked down it and opened the door to ground level, chest heaving and old wounds zinging with pain. He sprinted across campus to the shipyard, where older students kept their ships.

Thank fucking goodness for Sniff.

He slammed into two students as he rounded the corner to the shipyard, nearly falling on his ass.

"Tommy?! What the hell are you doing here?"

He glanced up to see Drista and Lani there, one of them carrying a phaser. "Why do you have a gun?"

"That's—that's beside the point," Drista snorted. "Aren't you supposed to be in your dorm?"

"I need you to listen to me," he said. "I read the briefing—"

"Hold on; you don't have clearance to do that," Lani said.

"Tubbo accidentally sent it to me," he explained quickly. "The *L'manburg* is in danger, and everyone is going to die if we don't get there in time."

There was a moment of silence.

"What?" Drista asked disbelievingly.

"It's a trap!" he said. "The briefing—the mission—everything is a *trap* set by the Arachnids, and they're going to kill everyone on the *L'manburg*!"

"You can't know that," Lani insisted.

"I can!" he nearly shouted. "It's the same mission that murdered the *H.M.S Fran*!" He remembered it, too. The briefing, the message. It was all the same—or far too similar for it to be a fucking coincidence.

"Okay," Drista said, suddenly serious. "You're sure?"

"One hundred percent," he said.

"How do you plan to send a message?" Lani asked him, fear suddenly palpable on her face.

He held up Sniff's ship keys. "I don't plan on sending anything but myself."

"We're coming with you," Drista announced. Tommy opened his mouth to argue, but the blonde-haired Human cut across him. "*No*. This is our family too, Tommy. Our friends. If this is truly a trap—and I think it is, or at least *you* believe it to be, then I'm not going to sit back and let it happen."

Tommy snapped his mouth shut. It was exactly something he would have said—something that reminded him of Purpled's words. He hated being helpless and forcing Lani and Drista to stay while their family—more than he'd ever had—was running into a trap that would kill all of them—that was something that he would not do. It wasn't right.

"Okay," he said. "Come on."

He would save them. He would save the Children's Rebellion members—they would not die as his father and aunt had. He could prevent this.

He just had to be fast. Fast enough. And fucking hell, he was an Avian. If he could be fast...if he wasn't fast enough...no, he wouldn't lose another group of friends.

They found Sniff's ship soon enough, an L-class fighter of Elytrian make that, to Tommy's knowledge, could push warp five if need be. He silently thanked Sniff's creator and everything about her and unlocked it, rushing straight to the pilots' seat.

"Drista," he said. "Co-pilot. Lani, communications."

"What about tactical?" the blonde-haired girl asked as she sat down dutifully in the seat Tommy had gestured to, glancing at the controls as the hatch slid close with a smooth hiss.

"If we need tactical, then the *L'manburg* is dead," he said coolly, and Drista swallowed and nodded.

Tommy flexed his fingers, put his hands on the unfamiliar controls, and began the process of learning how to fly this ship. Lani yelped as they swung left, nearly clipping the wing of a neighboring ship. Internally, he winced.

Externally, he was cold and callous, and he needed to save his friends.

Fuck, he would not watch them die again. He would not. He would *never* let that happen again. He didn't know if he could take it twice. Phil was his guardian. Tubbo was his friend. Purpled and Ranboo were, essentially, his family.

He would not watch them die. He wouldn't.

Tommy finally righted the ship and shot them out of Earth's atmosphere, flicking a few switches to enable the artificial gravity and the shields. He refused to think about what would happen should he fail.

No, he wouldn't fail.

"Shouldn't we be getting clearance?" Lani asked suddenly as the communications crackled.

"Yes," he said. "But we're breaking a lot of rules, and I don't fucking give a shit." Lani and Drista had the intelligence not to question him as he held down the lever, and they shot into warp-five, the ship shaking slightly under the pressure.

"What now?" Lani said.

"We wait," Tommy said. "It should be about fifty minutes to catch up with them. Each warp level up is—it's complicated, but square roots. Yeah."

"Wait, but they left like...five hours ago," Drista said, as Lani snorted at his poor attempt at explaining warp factor travel.

"Yeah, but they had to go through the clearance process," he said. "Plus, chances are, they're actually going warp factor three and a half or something."

"We're gonna get there in time, right?" Lani said, curling up slightly. Drista stood up and walked over to the younger girl, hugging her awkwardly.

Tommy paused, his heart panging. "I can't promise anything," he said, thinking of the promise a family member had made to him a million years ago. "But—we might. Only just." They'd broken that promise, and he had wanted to believe that they would keep it one day. They had never had, and so Tommy refused to make promises that he knew he wouldn't keep.

"How do you even know this is a trap, Tommy?" Drista asked him.

He sighed. "I told you. The *H.M.S Fran* took on a similar mission. It was a trap that ended in the death of my dad and aunt and everyone I'd ever known." He swallowed. "It got me put in that prison for a—a while, and the Piglins were trapped on that planet for a few months."

"Yeah, but most missions are secret," Drista said. "Especially from a civilian."

"My dad was Captain Sam Innes," he deadpanned. "Nothing was ever really secret aboard the *H.M.S Fran* to me." Two different jaws dropped. Tommy flinched, glancing out the window at the stars that spun fast. This was really not how he'd wanted to tell them. The Admiral had been right.

"*Seriously?*" Drista nearly shouted. "What the hell?!"

"Yeah," he said. "My aunt was Cara Puffy."

"Dammit, Tommy," Drista groaned, whereas Lani looked speechless. "Really?" He nodded. "Fucking hell." She gave a sort of screaming laugh that was half maniacal and half disbelievingly. "That—that sort of explains a lot, actually."

"Yeah," he said, this throat suddenly thick. "I'm surprised you didn't figure it out sooner. The *L'manburg* is chock-full of mini geniuses." He didn't think about the fact that the *L'manburg* would be nothing but a pile of steel in space if they didn't get there fast enough.

"It was never recorded that Captain Sam had a kid," Lani pointed out warily.

"It was fifteen-year-mission," he said. "The Vice Admiral back on Earth knows. He showed me my file. It showed—it showed a lot of things that have never seen the light of day."

"Well, I suppose that explains Clementine's odd reaction to you," Drista sighed.

"I've known her for a while," he said quietly. "She was named after my dead sister."

"You have—had a sister?" Lani asked softly, tilting her head at him, brown eyes surveying him. Drista just had one of those pitying looks she hated on her face.

"Yeah," he responded. "I never...knew her. I was...what, four or five? My mom came down with some sort of mania sickness that she died from, and Clementine died with her." He shrugged. "Dad built an A.I. after that. After the sister I could never have."

"I'm sorry," Drista told him.

He laughed dryly. "People keep telling me that, you know. I'm sorry—for what? I'm sorry your parents are dead, Tommy? I'm sorry—that doesn't do anything unless you were part of the problem. You guys were toddlers when it happened, and so the dilemma is not with you." Lani was giving him a puzzling look. "Just...I'm tired of apologies. It is what it is. Life goes on, and then you die."

Drista made a strangled sound in her throat. "That's a horrible saying."

"Life is horrible," he told her. "That's...sort of how it works."

"Uh, no," Lani said, crossing her arms. "Life is sometimes good too."

"Is it?"

"Well, you met Tubbo, right?" the Shulker pointed out. "And Purpled, and Wilbur and Philza and Sniff..." she trailed off. "And me and Drista, I suppose."

Tommy didn't respond to that.

They catch up with the *L'manburg* three minutes after the predicted fifty that Tommy had. He'd spent those long seconds in a long internal debate on whether or not they would *get* there in time or if he would appear in a scrapyard with the remnants of a crew that had become his friends in such a short period.

If after everything he had done to save Purpled and Ranboo, he would lose them again. If after making new friends—somehow obtaining a guardian, for some reason—if after all the problems he had caused and fixed, all the things they *knew*, they would die as he tried to save them, and failed, as he had so many times.

Yet...they make it, and Tommy jumped as he heard the telltale crackles of the public frequency he'd instructed Lani to leave open. The girl in question looked up at it, making eye contact with the other two passengers as she pressed the transmit button.

"Hello?" she said. "This is Lani Underscore. Can anyone hear me?"

There was a bit of silence.

› *What the hell.* ‹

"Fundy!" Tommy shouted, springing to his feet, walking over to the communications board, and putting his face nearer to the microphone. "You need to beam us aboard!"

› *Tommy? Lani? What the fuck is going on?* ‹

"I'm here too," Drista drawled.

› *Drista?!* ‹

"That's beside the point," Tommy said. "Fundy, you need to get us aboard the *L'manburg* now."

› *I think I need to contact the bridge —* ‹

"IF YOU DO NOT BEAM US ABOARD, THEN IN TEN MINUTES, EVERYONE ABOARD THE *L'MANBURG* IS GOING TO DIE!" he roared, making Drista fall out of her chair, and Lani flinch widely.

Another bout of silence.

› Energizing. Prepare for teleportation. ‹

Tommy breathed a sigh of relief and closed his eyes, throwing a small apology to a Human girl all the way back on the planet known as Terra that had lent him this ship. It was as good as gone, but he promised himself that he would get her a new one if he survived this. Or get Phil to. Somehow. If they didn't live...well, she would have other things to deal with that were more important than a missing civilian ship, expensive as it had been.

He opened his eyes on the transport deck of the *L'manburg*, a horrified orange-haired Kitsune facing him.

Oopsies, I forgot to mention that my family was a bunch of war heroes with savior complexes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nothing makes a room feel emptier

than wanting someone in it.

- Calla Quinn

"What the hell are you talking about, Tommy?" Fundy breathed out, fixing him with a look.

"It's a trap," he said grimly. "I—I need to warn the bridge."

"I can comm—"

"NO!" he shouted. "They won't believe you, and I don't have time to argue. I can *prove* that it's a fucking trap, and I need to do it up there with Clementine and—and the holograms—"

"Is he okay?" Fundy asked, glancing at Lani and Drista, who stood behind him.

"Unfortunately, he's serious," Drista said. "I believe him, and the evidence is staggering."

Fundy nodded once, and Tommy sprinted past him into the hallway. He didn't draw on his Avian abilities—he couldn't risk it, and besides, ever since Jacob, he just...hadn't. Hadn't felt like it, hadn't wanted to. The second time using his biology to beat the track kids had been far more manageable

—and less dangerous—than the first. He'd *known* that it would be hard to breathe and so had held his breath for the ten seconds it took him to run the length of the track.

He skidded to a halt next to the elevator, vividly remembering the code Sapnap had typed in the first time he had been on the ship and tapped it in with slightly shaking hands. The lift slid open, and the three of them stepped inside.

"Dream isn't going to like this," Drista muttered as Tommy paced irritably, the computerized elevator starting its ascent.

He ignored her. "Clementine," he said. "You knew this was a trap. And you still let them go on this mission?" Lani frowned, glancing at the white steel around her.

» That information is in my classified records, Tommy, and as such, I cannot speak of them to those that do not hold a clearance. This includes everyone from Command. «

Drista jumped, clearly surprised that the A.I. had responded. "Clementine," Lani murmured, a new understanding entering her eyes.

Tommy hissed through his teeth. "So you knew this was a trap?" There was no response. "Consider Ensigns Lani and Drista with clearance to those records, Clementine."

» Of course, Tommy. Yes, I was aware this was a trap. Unfortunately, it is against my rules to break my coding and override such commands. «

"But don't you care for the crew?" he burst out.

» **Of course I do. But commands are commands, and I must stand by them.** «

"Even if hundreds die?"

» **I am not alive, Tommy. You know that. I do not have the emotions that you beings have. I admit that I would be saddened to see the crew of the *L'manburg* gone, but affection is not something that I am available to have.** «

"You said you were glad to see me," he pointed out through clenched teeth, his knuckles white.
"When we first met after seven years. *You said you were glad to see me.* "

» **A standard greeting among the living, unless I am mistaken?** «

"No, you aren't," Lani answered when Tommy squeezed his eyes shut and didn't respond. "People say that."

» **Unfortunately, Tommy, you will find that I am nothing like what you imagine your sister could have been. I am an artificial intelligence, and nothing tangible. I realize that saying something as callous as this may seem harmful to your mental well-being, but I must point out that while I was named after your dead sibling, I am nothing like her. I am not a real person, and therefore, cannot feel emotions outside of the coding that I was given.** «

Tommy felt a tear roll down his cheek as he pivoted away from Drista and Lani. Somehow, in his separation from...from Clementine, he had forgotten. Something in his brain had somehow put the

mental picture that Clementine actually cared—that she was an illegal A.I., one with feelings and actual thoughts besides lines of code.

Of course, she wasn't. She was right—Clementine was always right; she was *programmed* to be correct.

He didn't have time to think more than that because the doors slid open on the bridge, and five pairs of eyes meet his.

"Drista...?" Dream shouted, and he was the first one to talk as he nearly leaped out of his chair, green eyes wide.

"Lani?!" Tubbo gasped.

"*Tommy*?" Wilbur asked, rubbing his eyes.

"What the fuck," Philza said flatly.

"It's a trap," Tommy said instantly. "You're all going to fucking die if you keep this up with no shields and no warning." He crossed his arms. "Well, here's your warning. This mission is a trap."

"How do you know?" Techno asked instantly, not looking surprised in the slightest, though he couldn't have possibly known Tommy was going to pull this.

"Because I read the mission debriefing," he said, stepping into the bridge. Tubbo flinched slightly, and Philza swung his head to glare at him. "This is a trap, and you're walking right into that."

"You can't *possibly* know—" Dream started.

"It's the same damned mission that caused the deaths aboard the *H.M.S Fran*," he snapped. "The same words, the same situation. It's a fucking trap, and I'm not about to let you walk into it." Tommy rubbed his face. "I read the transcript that we received aboard the bridge on my ship

twenty-seven minutes before Captain Sam Innes and Captain Cara Puffy drove the ship right into the side of the attacking one. I know it by heart, and believe me when I say it's the *same* one."

"But—mission briefs aren't for civilians or even the regular crew..." Wilbur trailed off.

"My father was the captain, so I typed in the passcode and read it," he said bluntly.

Phil turned sharply to look at him, wings bristling. "Your father was Captain Sam Innes?"

"Yes," he said. "And my aunt was Puffy."

"God fucking dammit," Dream cursed. "*Seriously?*"

"That was my reaction," Drista said dryly. "We were aboard the lift, and Clementine talked about it. I believe him."

"I don't *not* believe him," Phil groaned. "But—it's hard to accept."

Tommy stared at him for a second. "Clementine," he said after a moment. "Activate hologram seven four two nine. Password is TommyInnit."

» **Shall I skip to the end?** «

He waved his hand, ignoring the confused faces of everyone currently on the bridge. "Only the final moments, please."

» **Of course, Tommy.** «

"Hologram?" Phil muttered.

"You don't have clearance to access them, nor know of their existence," he told the captain, watching with his heart in his throat as the motion cameras activated. Dream jumped slightly as the hologram's thin plane covered his controls, changing them to look a lot like Tommy's setup temporarily integrated at the fueling station. Phil stood up from his seat, and the other remaining bridge members watched in wonder as a light blue, slightly glitchy hologram covered the bridge until it resembled the *H.M.S Fran's* bridge—minus the color.

"*Sam?*"

Tommy spun to look behind him, clapping a hand over his mouth as a woman—a Feline—stepped out of the lift, wiping tears away from her eyes. Her white curly hair, now a pale blue in the technological light, fell around her shoulders, and her ears twitched with agitation. It was achingly realistic for a 3D hologram that flickered ever so slightly and radiated cerulean light.

"*Puffy*," his father's voice said, and Tommy resisted falling to his knees and screaming, for his heart fucking *hurt* and the voices of his family were nearly too much to handle.

Sam sat in the chair that Philza had vacated, looking as blue and as fake as his aunt did, but the voice recording was *there*. He had known this hologram—and many like it—had existed, but he had never dared to see them until now.

"*You don't plan to keep your promise, do you?*" Puffy said in a low voice, walking over and placing a hand on Sam's shoulder as they stared out the window at the battle that, for them, was playing on the other side. Wilbur jumped out of the way to let her, though she would have passed right through the Phantom. "*Sam, you promised your son that you would be okay.*"

"*That's not what I said,*" his father responded. "*I said I would see him again.*"

Puffy was silent, contemplating. Tommy noted the furrow between her eyes that appeared when she was mad. *"You lied to him."*

"I...did not," his father said. *"I made a choice. Tommy simply inferred based on the information that he was given."* At his name, about seven pairs of eyes whipped around to look at him, but Tommy was glued on the envisionments of his family. *"Are the Piglins and Hoglins safe?"*

"They are on the escape pods," Puffy responded. Techno tilted his head slightly. *"As are the crew. And Tommy."*

"Get your ass on one of them and eject them," Sam told her. *"That's an order."*

"No," Puffy said firmly.

"Puffy."

"No," the Feline told him. *"I know what you plan to do."*

"It is what must be done," Sam told her firmly.

"I'm not saying it's not," Puffy said grimly. *"I'm just saying I don't like it."*

"Go with Tommy," Sam told her. *"Tell him I'm sorry."* And in that desperate moment, Tommy knew that his father had tried to make it so he was not alone. So he would not be alone.

Puffy was silent. *"Autopilot is broken,"* she said, and it wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"I estimate a thirty percent chance at success should you attempt to follow through with your plan," Puffy told him. "Clementine is in her black box, already ejected. You will not succeed."

"I might."

"But then it does not matter, for everyone, should you fail, including Tommy and me, will die," Puffy said. She reached over Sam's shoulder and pressed the big red button.

The entire bridge crew of the *L'manburg* watched as the words **ESCAPE PODS EJECTED** flashed across the screen. Tommy could have sworn that he heard his younger self scream, though he doubted it was possible.

"What are you doing?" Sam asked her quietly.

"Upping their chances," Puffy told him. *"We must save the Piglins and the Hoglins. Our crew, your son."* Techno looked away from the scene, the hand on his face picking at one of the tusks protruding from his mouth. He looked deep in thought, though Tommy hardly spared him a glance before looking back at his family.

"So he will have neither of us."

"At least he will live."

"And if he does not?"

He had lived, but at what cost? At what cost to his sanity, to the thousands of tears, to the blood that had long dissolved into the earth—he had lived, he had scrambled and fought for a damn place in this universe—it had not been given to him without blood, without sweat, and without tears. He had lived, but his shoulders were thousands of pounds heavier and his heart shattered into pieces.

"Then it could not have been prevented anyway," Puffy said, sitting down in Dream's seat—her seat, in this hologram. *"Manually programming the ship now."* She pointed at the Operations desk. *"Go sit over there and type what I tell you to."*

Tubbo lept a foot in the air and scampered away with a small yelp as the hologram of Tommy's father got up from the Captain's chair and walked over to his desk. Puffy rambled off some words that Tommy didn't particularly understand—or care to hear—and Sam tapped them in dutifully.

"On my mark," Puffy said. "Pull the red lever."

Sam nodded.

"Go."

Together, they pulled their respective levers, and Tommy could almost envision the ship lurching forward, partially on fire, missing one of its engines—he could remember screaming as it soared towards the Arachnid's ship; the Piglin and Hoglin escape pods heading towards the surface of the only nearby planet.

The blast was so large that his escape pod had failed, and he'd been dead in space for a different group of Arachnids to pick up.

Puffy stood up and walked over to Sam, the Avian standing up and meeting her halfway, wrapping his arms around her.

"I'm sorry, Tommy," the Avian breathed out, speaking as if he knew that this conversation—this mass observation—would somehow occur in the future. *"I want you to live."*

He had not understood. He had been ten, and he had not *understood*. He did, now. He knew. He knew what they had done and why they had done it. He did not like it, but God knew he understood *why*.

Puffy was crying, and he knew why, and he knew that if he walked around to the other side of the bridge, he would see his father crying too, but he was glued in place, and he could not. He could not see his father cry, and he could barely stand to see his aunt.

"Love you," Puffy whispered, and he startled as her hologram made direct eye contact—as if she too knew, one day, that he would be watching.

Then there was a loud explosion, and the hologram fizzled out.

» **Last recorded hologram, Terran Wednesday, 1107. No other recordings have since been made aboard the *H.M.S Fran* . «**

"Miss you," Tommy whispered into the emptiness of his heart, Clementine's words doing nothing to help the jolt in his heart.

There was no response. There never would be. Seven years ago, his family had passed.

"Tommy?" Tubbo asked.

Tommy blinked, wiping away his tears. Glancing around the room, he noted that they were all looking at him with varying degrees of pity and sadness. "Uh. Anyway. That's my proof. This is a trap. Put up your fucking shields."

Tubbo glanced at Phil, who nodded quickly, his blue eyes shinier than usual. The Shulker sat down at his station, from where he'd vacated it getting away from Sam's hologram. "Raising shields."

"Arriving in T-minus twelve seconds," Dream warned suddenly, and Wilbur spun from looking at Tommy to look at the window. He reached out and steadied himself on the wall, Lani and Drista on either side of him. "Five seconds. Four. Three. Two. One—"

They slammed to a halt in the middle of empty space, a large Arachnid ship blocking the light of a thousand stars.

"SHIT!" Tubbo screamed, voicing all of their thoughts in one singular word.

"Drista!" Dream snapped. "Take control of tactical!" His sister leaped into action, sitting down in the chair and pressing a few of the buttons. Tommy stood there awkwardly as the bridge paused, waiting for commands from Phil.

The Arachnid ship fired, and the *L'manburg* shuddered. Tommy cursed as he nearly fell on his face, grabbing onto the back of the captain's chair to steady himself. He seized Lani's arms before the Shulker could introduce her face to the harsh floor, and the girl gave him a weak smile in response.

"Shields at eighty-seven percent!" Tubbo called out, a slight tremor in his voice.

"Drista, fire back," Phil ordered, somehow maintaining his calm as the bridge moved into a frenzy. Wilbur was shouting orders down the comm at some engineers, explaining the situation, and Techno was tapping rapidly at his table, doing who-knew-what. "Dream, get us out of here."

"Permission to use full firepower, sir?" Drista asked, brushing a bit of her blonde hair behind her ear.

"Permission granted."

"Doing so," Drista said. She stared at her screen for a second, and Tommy stumbled again, once more grabbing Lani's arm to stop her from falling as the ship heaved once more. "Phil—Captain, I...it didn't do anything, the ship is too big! Barely one percent of their shields have been damaged!"

"Fuck," Phil muttered.

"The warp drives are overheating," Wilbur announced, and Tommy felt his heart drop. "Got a call from Engineering. They want to know what's going on."

Dream cursed rapidly, lifting his hands off the controls. "Tommy—"

"No info!" he snapped, his heartbeat loud in his own ears. "They retreated once my dad drove the ship into the side of it! It was never destroyed!"

"Shields at forty-three percent!" Tubbo shouted over the commotion.

Phil grimaced. "Where's the nearest planet?"

"Nowhere," Techno said. "We're in empty space, four light-years away from the nearest solar system or planet of any kind." He was deadly calm for the horrifying situation they were in, for which Tommy was glad. If he was going to die, it would not be by freaking out.

Phil looked calmer than Tommy had ever felt. "Drista, are the weapons—"

"—they're not doing much!" the Human girl cried out, tapping the buttons rapidly. "I'm trying to aim for the weak points, but I have no idea where they are!"

"Don't ask me!" Tommy cried out, as four separate people glanced at him. "I was a prisoner, not a fucking engineer! Besides, this isn't a regular Arachnid ship!"

"Shields at fifteen percent," Tubbo said, voice wavering, and Tommy watched with horror as the red flashes of lasers coming from the Arachnid ship made the *L'manburg* falter again. "They're tearing through us!"

"Captain, we're getting a transmission from the enemy vessel," Wilbur said. Tommy watched as the red lasers stopped, the imposing ship stopping in its tracks of destruction. "I've also sent a message to the branches of the ship explaining that we're being attacked and to get to a safe space." Nobody mentioned how if the Arachnid ship broke through their shields, it wouldn't matter anymore.

"Drista, stop firing," Phil said, putting up a hand.

Techno glanced up. "Phil—"

"*Stop firing*; that's an order," Phil said, cutting across his First Officer. Drista spun around in her chair and listened to him, her hands rapidly moving across the controls. Tommy watched as the blue lasers from the *L'manburg* dwindled, the tactical team relaying the orders. "Wil, patch them through."

Tommy's breath hitched as the window in front of them flickered to reveal the transmission. He'd known this would come—it had come for the *H.M.S Fran* too, yet he hadn't been a hundred percent sure.

It was the same fucking person.

Beady black eyes, mandibles poking from his lower lip—nothing could hide the person that had murdered his parents, not even half his head plated in metal, and a red robotic eye was gleaming from his face.

Serves you fucking right, Tommy thought imprudently.

"Captain Philza of the *L'manburg*," the Arachnid drawled, resting his chin on the back of one of his palms. "How lovely to meet you at last."

"I can't say I've ever heard of you," Phil said in a steady voice. Tommy noted that his hands were white-knuckled and clenched.

The Arachnid's eyes flashed with distaste before he calmed down. "I suppose that's a good thing," he murmured. "It matters not. I am Merikh Rience."

"Still haven't heard of you, mate," Phil said warily.

"What?" Merikh said, drawing back sharply. "What of the *H.M.S Fran*?"

"Unfortunately, leaving no survivors can do that type of thing." Tommy bit his lip until he drew blood at Phil's words.

"I destroyed that ship to smithereens."

"They drove it into the side of your starship and killed themselves." Well, true, but harsh.

"Semantics. They are dead, and I am not." Merikh's eyes paused on Tommy for a second too long before continuing his scroll across the people on the bridge crew. "Hmm. Quite a party you have here, Captain."

"What do you want with my ship?" Philza asked, ignoring the question.

"I don't care about your stupid little *ship*," Merikh sneered. "I wonder...do you know anything on the survival of the Avians?"

Philza, to his credit, didn't miss a beat. "Didn't their species die out?"

"Oh, *no*," the Arachnid purred. "See, now you're just lying." His beady eyes landed on Tommy and stayed there. "I bet *he* knows that I know who he is." Tommy jerked slightly. "There he goes. It's been a while, Tommy Innes."

"Don't call me that," he said in a low voice. "I hate you." Philza frowned at him, though not because of his words. Techno looked wary.

"Hate is a strong word."

"I can't think of anything worse—actually, wait, I can," Tommy snarled. "Motherfucker, dickhead, douche, bastard, a bitchboy, coward, asshole, a fucking *joke*—"

"You haven't changed a bit," Merikh said, leaning forward in his chair, and Tommy cut himself off. He noted with an internal smirk that Wilbur was hiding a smile behind his hand. "You know what the deal is. It's the same one that I asked of your lovely father and aunt. Look what refusing got them."

"Freedom?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Merikh hissed in distaste, his mandibles making a really awful clicking sound. "Death."

"One might say that chosen death is another word for freedom," he let out through clenched teeth. "You murdered them."

"They refused to comply with my wishes," Merikh said. "And so now the choice falls to you." He turned back to Phil. "Give me one of the last living Avians, and I won't blow your ship to kingdom come." He examined his hand, at the end of which rested a set of sharp talons. "Give me Tommy Innes, and you won't be found in the remains of your escape pods like the other members of the *H.M.S Fran's* were. You have one hour."

"No fucking way," Phil said, but the link had already dispersed.

"You can't be serious!" Tubbo shouted. "Absolutely not!"

"Yeah, as much as I pretend to dislike Tommy, that's a no from me," Techno rumbled, his lips peeling back from his teeth to further reveal his lower tusks.

Tommy opened his mouth, but Phil cut him off. "If the next words out of your mouth are something along the lines of *I'm going*, then you can stop right there." He snapped his mouth shut. "Yeah, I thought so. Look, Tommy. Nobody is going to let you do that."

"But—"

"But nothing," Phil said firmly. "We'll figure a way out of this that doesn't involve giving away a child to a bloodthirsty leader." He glanced at Tubbo. "Can you escort him to his room, please?"

"I want to stay," Tommy said weakly.

"No," Phil said. "You're not supposed to be on the ship anyway." He raised an eyebrow. "I appreciate everything, mate—I really do, but you *stowaways* need to back off for a bit." Drista made to get up, but he waved her down. "Not you. I need you at the Tactical deck."

"Why do *I* have to go?" Tubbo protested.

"Because Tommy's more likely to listen to you than any of us," Wilbur spoke up dryly. "So fucking tell him to stop being self-destructive."

Well, that hit a bit too close to home. Tubbo wandered over, grabbing Tommy's hand and dragging him into the lift, his sister following after a second thought. Tommy managed to see Phil walk over to Techno and point at something on his datapad before the doors slid shut.

"Why are you here, Lani?" Tubbo asked, sounding exhausted.

"You were going to die," his sister said coldly.

"Niki's gonna kill me."

"Too bad we're going to die anyway," Tommy muttered. Tubbo glanced at him. "Come on, man. You don't like this choice any better than I do. They have all the advantages."

"Chances are they'll take you prisoner and blow us all to kingdom come anyway," Tubbo pointed out dutifully.

"I have to *try*," he protested as the elevator doors slid open, and they started walking down the hallway. "Wait, this isn't the district floor...?"

"No," Tubbo said grimly. "It's not." Lani whipped her head around to look at him. "Come on, Tommy. I know you better than that. How many plans did you have of sneaking out of your quarters if I left?" Tommy didn't answer. "That's what I thought."

"You...want me to leave?" Tommy asked uncertainly.

"Surely not!" Tubbo said. "But it's not like I can stop you."

Fair enough, Tommy thought irritably. He would have snuck away had he needed to. He'd already made his choice the moment that Merikh had given it to him. The choice his family had—rightfully—refused. "You could tell Phil my plan."

"Yeah, he really should have had someone else escort you," Tubbo sighed. "Sometimes he still sees me as a kid, even though I'm his C.O.O.," Tubbo sighed again, more profound and filled with tiredness. "Well, it worked out for you in the end."

"Wait, what's going on?" Lani interrupted.

"I'm giving myself up to the Arachnids," Tommy told her, a thread of fear flying through him as he voiced his decision.

"*What*—no!"

"Yes," he said, and Tubbo looked at the ground. "I will go through you if I have to."

"Will you?" she asked quietly.

He raised an eyebrow. "To save the entire crew? Yes."

"Even at the cost of yourself?"

"That's not much," he scoffed. "Not really."

Lani stared at him. "You fucking idiot," she said. "If you survive this, I'm telling Niki."

"You do that," he told her warily as they rounded the corner back into the transport room. He paused when he saw the fox-eared Kitsune slumped over the controls, drooling slightly. A blonde-haired, magenta-eyed boy leaned against the wall, playing with a knife. He looked up when he saw the trio enter the room. "Purpled."

"Tommy," Purpled returned, a cold smile on his face. "How lovely."

"What'd you do to Fundy?" Tubbo asked.

"I gave him some alcohol with sleeping powder," Purpled said.

"That's illegal," Lani spoke up.

"What we're about to do is illegal," Purpled snapped. "Disobeying direct orders—taking control of a transport room? Boarding an enemy vessel?"

"Wait, hang on," Tommy said, holding up his hands. "You're not coming with me." He didn't even want to *know* how Purpled had listened in on the transmission.

"Yes, I am," Purpled said.

"I am, too," Tubbo announced.

"I'm not," Lani said, crossing her arms. "Someone has to beam you out, anyway." She wrinkled her nose at Fundy. "And tell the bridge crew that you guys are suicidal idiots."

"Not suicidal," Tommy corrected. "Just self-destructive." Lani didn't look very amused. Tubbo grinned, but it wasn't friendly.

Purpled walked further into the room, reaching to the side to grab a box that leaned against the wall. He pulled out three phasers, clipping one to his belt and tossing the other two to Tommy and Tubbo. The Shulker made his disappear with a flick of his wrist, whereas Tommy just held it, glancing at it.

"I really hope you know how to use that," Tubbo said.

"Sort of," he murmured. Sure, he was lying. He hadn't used a phaser in a very long time. How hard could it be? "I still don't get why you guys are coming with me."

"To go on the Arachnid ship?" Purpled said, tossing something to Tubbo that vaguely resembled a bomb. He sure as fuck hoped it wasn't a bomb, and as Tubbo blinked it away, that it wouldn't explode. "Duh."

"Yeah..." he trailed off. "But like...why?"

"We're gonna blow it up," Tubbo announced as Purpled pulled out four commlinks and tossed it to the three of them. Tommy placed his right behind his ear, watching as they synced up, beeping a green light of acceptance. "Obviously."

His jaw dropped. "*What.*" This plan was changing very, very quickly.

Tubbo reached over and tapped his chin until his mouth closed. "Keep the air in your mouth, big man. Where we're going, we'll need it." He conjured his datapad and squinted at it, walking over to the control panel and pushing Fundy off of it. Tommy winced as the Kitsune hit the floor. "Oops."

"What are you doing?" Lani asked her brother.

"I'm inputting an equation that Clementine showed me," Tubbo said. "To get us on the Arachnid ship."

"That exists?" Tommy asked.

"It does now," Tubbo said. "One of the mathematicians on your ship came up with it years ago. Unfortunately, they're dead, so their brilliance never saw the light of day." He glanced up as Lani took Fundy's vacated seat.

"We really should get trained professionals to do this," Tommy protested weakly.

"Hey, this was your idea," Purpled said, stepping onto the transporter pad.

"It...no," Tommy said. "My idea was a lot more *self-destructive* than leading a bunch of seventeen-year-olds to blow up a fucking starship." He squinted at the magenta-eyed-Human. "Shouldn't we get...I don't know, trained professionals involved in this?"

"They're adults," Tubbo said as he finished tapping in whatever transport equation that he'd done and padding over to the transporter and dragging Tommy behind him. "They're not as foolish as us."

"Is that what we are?" Purpled murmured, meeting Tommy's eyes. "Foolish?"

He coughed. "Yeah," he said after a moment. "Foolish. That's exactly what we are."

"...okay," Tubbo said, clearly not understanding. "Lani, energize."

"I'm gonna get fired," the girl groaned under her breath. "If you don't get out of there alive, I'll kill you."

"Redundant," Purpled grinned.

Lani raised an eyebrow and slammed her hand on the bright red button. "Energizing," she said. Tommy closed his eyes and breathed out through his nose as his particles started rearranging.

And just like that, a trio set off to blow up a starship.

Chapter End Notes

WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! THE CREW FINALLY KNOWS WHO TOMMY'S PARENTS ARE! THAT'S ONE STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION...AND WE'RE ON CHAPTER 14 AND 60K WORDS IN

damn I sure hope this plan doesn't go horribly wrong

damn I sure hope nobody dies

I have something I would consider better—BOMBS!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Nothing great was ever
accomplished without making
sacrifices.*

- Anonymous

The Arachnid ship was a dark place full of hissing mechanisms and tubes of what definitely wasn't blood, but totally looked like blood.

"That's totally blood," Tubbo said.

"That's—that's not blood," he explained patiently.

"It's red."

"Stars are red."

"Stars give out radiation. Radiation is cool. Blood is cool."

"Blood is warm."

"Not for cold-blooded—"

"Would you two stop having that lovely conversation?" Purpled hissed. Tommy rolled his eyes, hand playing with the phaser in his palm as he glanced around.

"Relax, Trigger Happy," he snorted, being his usual, hypocritical, self. "We're in the hold. Nobody is here."

"That's what you think."

"Hey, if you don't want to be here, you can just call Lani, and she can beam you back—" Tommy pointed out.

"No thanks," Purpled said coldly, glancing behind him once more. "This was my idea."

› *Damn terrible idea too.* ‹

"Shut up, Lani," Purpled snapped, and Tommy reached up and turned down the volume of his earpiece a little bit.

› *Hey, when you guys get yourselves killed, I'm pleading the fifth.* ‹

"Which reminds me..." Tommy trailed off. "I have a better idea than us sneaking down to the engine room and planting bombs there."

Purpled's eye twitched. Tubbo glanced between the two of them, likely wondering if the only bombs in the room were the ones in his fourth-dimensional space. Tommy had to admit that his friendship with Purpled was a giant ticking time explosive. Purpled was clearly annoyed that he wouldn't talk about everything, and Tommy wasn't willing to talk about anything. "Yeah?" the Human said after a moment. "Go on."

"A distraction," Tommy said, drawing himself up. "I give myself up; you guys plant the explosives. Lani gets us out of there, and we blow it up. Boom."

"That's a really shitty idea," Purpled growled at him, narrowing his eyes.

"No," Tubbo said, holding up his hand. "They'll be preoccupied with Tommy and less inclined to check the engine room..."

"You can't be *serious*," Purpled said. "He'll get himself killed." He glared at Tommy. "Not that he fucking cares." Tommy winced, glancing away from the Human boy.

Tubbo let out a breath. "Look, I don't want to get in between whatever the fuck is going on between the two of you, but you need to knock it off. Purpled, as much as I hate Tommy's awful plan, it might actually work. Tommy, you need to stop having a self-destructive arc. I thought it was bad before, but obviously, since you got into that fight, it's gotten worse."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he muttered.

"There you fucking go," Purpled sneered at him. "Refusing to talk about anything."

➤ *Would you guys stop arguing before you notify the entire ship of your presence?* ➤

"Thank you, Lani," Tubbo sighed. "Tommy. Your ideas are shit, and you need help."

"You keep going through with them," he said warily.

Tubbo threw up his hands. "Because I don't have a better one," he hissed. "I *hate* your ideas. I *hate* the look Phil's going to give me when we get back."

"*If* we get back," Purpled muttered.

"Be positive," Tubbo told him. "The problem is that Mi—whatever his name is—is probably going to take you to the bridge and flaunt you in front of the L'manburg, you know, like bad guys do." Tommy had a growing sense of horror. "Yeah. We're in huge trouble. Can't play this one off. Or downplay it."

"It either works, or it doesn't," Tommy pointed out helpfully. "If it works out, he can't be *too* mad, right? If it doesn't work out, we're dead. He can't be mad at dead bodies."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Purpled said.

"No problem."

"Look," Tubbo said. "I want to grab your arm and drag you down and tie you to a chair, so you stop—stop doing *that*—" He gestured at Tommy in general, which made Purpled snicker and just confused Tommy. "—but I can't, and I *doubt* I'll be able to stop you."

Tommy smirked. "True."

"Bitch," Purpled hissed. "If you die, I'll kill you."

› *That's redundant.* ‹

Purpled muttered something under his breath that made Tommy choke and was certainly something he'd never repeat. Tubbo snorted, rolling his eyes as he surged forward and hugged Tommy.

Tommy was forced to deal with the sudden roil of emotions as he hugged the brown-haired teenager back.

"You better come back, you hear me?" Tubbo sniffed. "We still haven't watched Frozen together."

"The fuck is Frozen?" he asked.

"Exactly," Tubbo said. "Stop being stupid. Don't antagonize the crew."

"No promises," Tommy said. "Some people just like hurting me." It was a joke, but both Tubbo and Purpled winced.

"Look, Tommy," Purpled said, sounding tired. "You—you can't die after everything."

"Some things were just meant to be," he told them dismissively.

"Stop being a fucking idiot and live," Purpled told him.

"I'll try," he told them.

(Would he?)

Honestly, Tommy didn't particularly care. His aunt and father's faces hung in his head, and all he wanted was to see them again—yet for now, he resided in the world of the living, and that held him back.

The Arachnids found him. He wasn't exactly hiding. Tommy hated them. Hated the extra hair they had when they grabbed his arms, hair that pricked his skin and made goosebumps rise up on his neck and arms. Hated the sticky cobwebs they produced to bind his hands. Hated their beady eyes and hated the mandibles that poked out of their lower lips. He remained silent as he was marched up to the bridge, dreading the subsequent encounter. Not with Merikh—but with a video call and a particular ship.

"So, Tommy Innes," Merikh said when he'd reached the bridge. He was even more ugly looking in person, what with his half-robotic face and awful limp.

"You're even more ugly looking in person," Tommy said and then flinched when one of the Arachnid guards at his shoulders raised a hand to slap him.

Merikh raised a hand. "Don't. He's not worth it." Tommy bristled angrily but didn't respond to the jibe. "Now, Tommy, I have a few questions for you."

"Ask away," he muttered, thinking of the earpiece in his left ear that was covered by his hair. Lani was listening to the whole thing—recording, hopefully, if she was doing what he asked of her.

"Where are the remaining Avians?"

Tommy paused. Okay, he hadn't been expecting that question, because that bitch had already asked Phil. "Um..." he said. "Are you Catholic or Christian, by chance? If so, Heaven. I don't know much about the afterlives of other religions, but—"

"No, you fool," Merikh hissed, and Tommy was suddenly aware of the danger he was in. He shut up. "The planet. Where is your home planet?"

Tommy frowned. He was genuinely confused. "I was born on the *H.M.S Fran*."

Merikh clearly had enough of him because he grabbed Tommy's shirt and slammed him against the metal wall. Tommy debated making a dirty joke but thought against it because that would undoubtedly make the Arachnid that had murdered his family even madder.

"You stupid *boy*," the Arachnid snarled. "I am asking you a simple question. Your pitiful father knew the location of your species' home planet. *Where* is it?"

Tommy blinked at him stupidly. "The Avians have a home planet?" Merikh looked surprised. "Look, buddy, I don't know if you knew this, but I didn't even know my parents were in the Galactic Rebellion until I figured it out for myself."

Merikh blinked at him. "They—did not tell you?"

He eyed the Arachnid warily. "I was ten, you dumb bitch. Adults don't tell kids anything."

"But certainly you feel animosity towards them for that?" Merikh said, searching for a weak point.

He snorted. "No. I don't fucking care. I had a big mouth as a kid. I would have spilled it the second I wanted to show someone how cool I was." He shrugged. "They would have told me when I was older."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Stop fucking trying to drive a wedge between my family and me," he spat. "It's not gonna work, you fucking *dickhead*."

Merikh sneered, drawing a phaser from his stupid black leather holster. He flipped the safety off for a second, staring at it and then turning to an Arachnid that was sitting at a desk. "Establish a connection between the *L'manburg* and us." Tommy's breath hitched. "You think that I don't know anything about what's going on with this ship. You think that I'm stupid?"

"Yes," Tommy said honestly.

"You're wrong," Merikh said.

"No, no," he said. "I don't think I am."

"We caught your little friends on the way to the engine room," Merikh said, and Tommy's eyes widened. *No, no*—they *couldn't* have, Tubbo and Purpled were safe— "Ah. I see you know them."

"No," he stuttered. "No, *no*—"

And then turned as the lift doors opened and Purpled and Tubbo were shoved through, followed by three guards. Purpled gave him a sorrowful look, but Tubbo had one of silent victory that he quickly arranged to dread. Tommy saw it, though, and wondered of it.

"Sir, the *L'manburg* has accepted our hail," the Arachnid at the Communications desk said.

"Good," Merikh said. "Patch them through." He played with the phaser in his hand for a second, weighing it.

And then Tommy watched as he aimed the gun at Tubbo's head. He surged forward, anger filling him—*fear* filling him—and one of the Arachnid guards grabbed his shoulders, forcing him to his knees.

Tubbo stood, frozen, and Purpled was blinking rapidly, but the three of them had their arms tied behind their back with technology akin to spiderwebs, and Tommy was, once again, helpless.

He was always, in the end, helpless.

The window in front of the bridge flickered to reveal the bright interior of the *L'manburg*. Tommy saw immediately as everyone realized what was going on, *who was on the fucking enemy ship*—

"Uh, uh," Merikh said, wagging a finger with his android arm as Wilbur shouted something that Tommy could not hear. "You're muted from this side. We can't hear you. I don't care how many demands you make; you aren't going to get anything. There's only one person who can save the life of this...thing—" Tubbo stuck out his tongue childishly. "—and that's *him*." He pointed at Tommy without removing his eyes from the Shulker.

"Fucking *let go* of him!" Tommy shouted, refusing to meet the eyes of anyone on the bridge of the *L'manburg* as he stared down the Arachnid. His world was crumbling. *He* was crumbling.

They were on their feet now—Phil and Wilbur and Dream and Techno and Drista. Fear. So much fear.

"Then answer my questions, Avian," Merikh said.

"I already told you!" Tommy said furiously. "I don't know the location of the Avian home planet!" Tubbo's eyes widened minusculely, and Purpled looked curious.

"I know," Merikh said calmly, and Tommy tried not to cry. "But I want to know the location of the final member of the Children's Rebellion."

Time froze. Tommy's jaw dropped, and for once, Purpled looked stricken.

"I know you know," Merikh crooned. "Chroma told me." Tommy felt the tears slide from his eyes. "What—there's the Human—here—" he turned the gun to Purpled for a split second, and Tommy's heart, if possible, broke further. "And there's the albino Enderian. I don't care about him. I want the leader. I know he exists. There were three survivors, not two."

"What are you talking about?" Tubbo cried out. "There were only two; I was *there*—" And both Tommy and Purpled locked eyesight and they *knew*, they *knew* that somehow Chroma had told them—

"No, dear boy," Merikh said, turning the phaser back to the Shulker, who flinched violently, the Arachnid guards behind him making him unable to move away from certain death. "There were three. Your friend knows that." He gestured to Purpled, who looked away and didn't answer. "The leader. The one who watched the executions. The one who *wasn't* sick in a cave and who didn't get amnesia."

"They were executed!" Tubbo said. "Nobody lived!"

"Clearly, your friends have been keeping secrets from you," Merikh said. "There's another one. And Tommy here knows where he is."

Tommy laughed, then. He laughed as tears poured down his face, and he felt like everything was broken. Merikh wanted *him*. Holy shit—Merikh wanted the leader of the Children's Rebellion. Tubbo stared at him confoundedly, and Purpled gave him a sad look. "Fuck off," he snarled. "He doesn't need anything else to deal with." Tubbo's eyes widened. "He's already been through enough."

"You sure?" Merikh said. "I'll kill them." He tilted his head. "You know I will."

Tommy knew. "I..." he said.

"Tell me where the leader of the Children's Rebellion is," Merikh said, his finger drawing nearer to the trigger.

"Don't," Purpled warned. "It's not worth it. They just want to erase Pogtopia from existence." He sneered. "Pretend it never fucking happened. Well, history will *always* be remembered, Merikh Rience."

"History is written by the victors, you stupid boy."

Purpled's eyes flashed with childish rebellion—a notion, Tommy thought wryly, that was one of the reasons that they sat here, alive. "Then to fucking hells with you," he spat. "You will never win. You will never be remembered as a hero. You are pitiful and weak and even if I die here today, *I will be remembered as a hero*. You will die in shame and I will laugh at you from whatever afterlife comes after." He shook his head. "Pogtopia will be remembered for what it was."

"It was a mistake," Merikh hissed at him. "Nothing more."

"THEY MURDERED CHILDREN!" Purpled screamed at him, losing his cool. "THEY EXECUTED MY FRIENDS!" He spoke the words that Tommy never could. He screamed the anger that Tommy never would, especially in front of an audience. His emotions bore what Alyssa and Grian and Foolish would never have, for they were dead and gone amongst the bodies of others wrongfully killed.

"Survival of the fittest. Only the best survive."

"They. Killed. My. Friends," Purpled said with a ferociousness that surprised everyone listening but Tommy—there was a reason that Purpled had survived the bloodbath, a *reason* that he had lived. "You and your buddies killed over three thousand teenagers and children—half of whom starved to death." He crossed his arms. "I talked with the Vice-Admiral about the warehouses. If—if *Chroma* had called for aid, even from *your species*, and he had rationed properly, we could have all lived." Purpled laughed dryly. "But instead, I sat in a cave because my name was on a list for which I should have been executed."

"I didn't know that," Tubbo whispered. "I thought that you—that you were chosen to survive."

"No," Purpled said. "Ranboo and I were first round." He met Tommy's eyes. "He—my leader—told us to run. He stayed behind and followed us later and gave us food." Purpled shook his head. "He lives. He does not want to talk about it, but he lives."

"That information is useless," Merikh scoffed. "I want his *location*."

"Fuck off," Purpled said, spitting at his feet. "Over my fucking dead body."

"That can be arranged," Merikh said, turning the phaser onto the seething magenta-eyed boy. "One less survivor for Chroma deal with." He glanced at the transmission screen, where the crew is scrambling to try to get them—they wouldn't get there in time, but they were trying. Phil looked up for one second, lost, his eyes meeting Tommy's.

Merikh Rience pressed the trigger.

Tommy screamed. The lights flashed, and the transmission flickered.

He would not let Purpled die.

Tubbo shouted something, and Purpled was flung to the side, the phaser scorching by his cheek and ripping through his ear. The Human screamed as he fell to the ground, blood pouring from his ears. His eyes flickered shut, and Tommy did not know if his heart still beat.

Merikh snarled, turning the phaser upon Tommy. "Kill them all," he said, waving a hand at his crewmates, who drew their phasers. "Save the Avian for me."

One by one, they raise their fingers to form the signs, and Tommy's hands shake as he does so, wetness dripping down his face as he glares at the guards.

"Kill them all," Chroma growls, and if his eyes glance over Tommy, he does not know. He does not know because something in him shatters and hurts but separates him from his feelings, and he realizes that he hates Chroma and he wants the other Avian to die.

Something in him fragmented, and Tommy felt blood leak down his nose as Merikh was pushed across the room with the force of the air and Tommy *grabbed* and *tore*, and then he heard eight thumps and turned to see the Arachnid guards and members of the crew *drop*, some of them with their eyes open, glazed, because they were *dead*—

Later, they would call it the Red Planet's Genocide. They would talk of the Children's Rebellion and what it did; they would look over the camera footage and see the fire in Alyssa's eyes as she did one last act of rebellion. They would pour over the pictures and words scrawled upon the walls, and it would talk about the six members of the Children's Rebellion—a Phantom, a Human, an Elytrian, a Feline, an Enderian, and an Avian.

He was screaming. He was screaming, and there were flashing lights, and it was then that he realized he was no longer on the Arachnid ship, and there was a loud explosion, and he clapped his hands over his ears and pretended not to see the bright colors of the *H.M.S Fran* slamming into the enemy ship.

People were shouting, and Tommy was screaming, and then he ran out of breath, and he could not *breathe*. He tried, he tried, he *tried*, but nothing was coming in.

What had he *done*?

He had let Tubbo and Purpled die—

—wait, no, they lived—

Did they?

They did.

He had saved them.

He had *killed* them—

No, he had not. He had killed the Arachnids. Chroma—Chroma was after the survivors of Pogtopia. Chroma was after *him*. After all this time, he would die. He and Purpled and Ranboo would die, and join—

—join them.

Join Alyssa with her careful smile and her pretty singing voice that made the stars dance with joy. Join Foolish with his glowing eyes and stupid dance that made everyone laugh among the golden grass. Join Grian with his purple wings and his penchant for pranks and his wide grin. Join Puffy with her piloting skills and her wonderful way of figuring out Tommy's secrets. Join his father, join *Sam...* after everything.

Perhaps, he thought, he wanted it to happen.

No, was his immediate follow-up thought. No, he wanted to live. He had to. He had to protect Purpled and Ranboo—and Tubbo now. He was the leader of the Children's Rebellion and a survivor of the Red Planet. It was his duty. *No, I will live.*

I will live, and I will overcome everything that was meant to destroy me.

(Am I lying?)

Waking up was a slow process. His eyelids stuck together as if they had been glued, and his arms and feet felt heavy—unmoveable, perhaps. Everything was too bright and then too dark, and he opened his eyes to darkness.

He was in the medbay again.

Tommy choked out a tiny bit of laughter, his throat dry and hurting with the motion. He was always in the medbay, lately. Perhaps whoever had said that whenever he saw Niki, it was when he was injured, was right.

Speaking of the Chief Medical Officer...he saw her sitting next to him, staring at him. Not creepily—he'd saw her raise her head when he'd coughed.

"Hey," he whispered.

"Hi, Tommy," she said crisply.

He cringed slightly. "Am I in trouble?"

"Yes," she said and then handed him a glass of water with a straw. She steadied his hand when he took it, shaking slightly as he scooted himself up until he was sitting up. It wasn't anything like waking up in the medbay before—from Jacob's fight—it wasn't exactly painful. He just felt tired. Tommy sipped the water, grateful for the immediate relief he felt from the cool liquid. He was...not surprised at Niki's answer, though the time was 0243 Standard, so he supposed that was why Phil wasn't screaming at him yet.

At this point, he wouldn't even be surprised if he got kicked out of Fleet school. He decided right then and there that he wouldn't be sorry because he wasn't fucking sorry and never would be. Perhaps Lani and Drista were—they'd gotten roped into this mess—but he certainly wasn't.

"Are Tubbo and Purpled...?" he croaked out.

"They were released from medbay yesterday morning with salves for rope burn," Niki said pleasantly. "No other injuries."

"O-oh," he said. "That's good, then." A huge weight was released from his chest—they had *lived*, they were okay.

"Yes," Niki said tartly. "It is."

"Are you..." he handed the glass back to her. "...mad?"

Niki snorted, placing the glass down a tad harder than was necessary. "Of course I'm mad," she snapped. "I'm pissed. I'm horribly annoyed that you keep ending up here." Tommy glanced down at

his hands, concentrating on the feeling of the sheets against his legs and letting it ground him. "I'm beginning to think there's more to you than being reckless," she said.

"If you want an apology, I'm not giving you one," he said warily.

"I wasn't going to ask," Niki told him. "I'm also not going to blame you for what happened on that ship because I was told it was Purpled's idea for you *teenagers* to sneak onto a starship and blow it up."

He sat up straighter, remembering the sound of the explosion before he'd fainted. "It worked?"

"Yeah," Niki said. "They faked it as if they hadn't planted the explosions when they heard the guards coming and turned around." She shrugged. "When Lani finally managed to beam you out, Tubbo took out the detonator and blew it up. The bridge watched it explode. Apparently, it was Purpled's idea—he got it from some stupid book. Peter Johnson or something."

"Oh," he said. "Pretty cool."

"No, actually, it was stupid," Niki said. "But I'm not going to yell at you. I'll leave that to the rest of the people who had to watch you three get nearly executed."

He shrunk lower in his seat. "Am I in trouble?" he asked again.

Niki shrugged. "Honestly? Yes." She didn't change her answer, and Tommy hadn't really expected her to.

She walked out and told Tommy to get some sleep before she left.

Tommy did not get any sleep.

Purpled and Tubbo visited him the next day, early, before visiting hours.

"We're in trouble," Tubbo told him miserably. "I temporarily demoted from Chief Operations Officer for going against a direct order."

"I wasn't demoted," Purpled told him. "I still have to do my paperwork." He rolled his eyes. "They refused to talk to us until you woke up, so Tubbo and I just stayed in a storage room and hid."

"What about Lani and Drista?" he asked.

"They...are sort of in trouble," Tubbo said thoughtfully. "I mean, you stole...Snifferish's—"

"Sniff," he corrected absentmindedly. "And she gave it to us."

"—and abandoned her ship in the middle of warp, but Mr. Captain seems to think that you coerced Lani and Drista into coming—which they denied, and said that they insisted on it when you told them no—and *then* you were going to disobey Philza's direct orders again to stay on the ship and transport to the Arachnid starship."

"Which we did," Purpled said.

"Yeah," Tubbo sighed. "And then the bridge nearly watched Purpled, and I get executed, and then *you* freaked out and—" He cut himself off.

"Killed the Arachnids," he said, twisting his hands on his lap. He knew that Tubbo and Purpled were both looking at them. "I—I know. I felt it break."

"You mean their hearts?" Purpled said.

"No, he stopped the airflow, not exploded their hearts," Tubbo said, pushing Purpled's arm slightly.

"Am I getting tried for murder?" he asked softly.

"No," Purpled said. "You might get a commendation for that." Tommy looked up at the magenta-eyed boy sharply, and the Human shrugged. "The only thing you're going to get yelled at is for disobeying the captain's orders. Twice."

"But it worked," he protested.

Tubbo sighed. "Unfortunately," he said softly. "That's not how it works."

Chapter End Notes

this is what I call emotional manipulation

everything will be okay

okay :)

nobody died

nobody will die

...

...

In my defense, Admiral, he killed my family

Chapter Notes

I got some fanart :o I love fanart

[click here :\)](#)

yay

*Loyalty means nothing
unless it has at its heart
the absolute principle of
self-sacrifice.*

- Woodrow Wilson

Tommy still hadn't spoken to any of the ship's crew members—besides Niki, Tubbo, and Purpled—when they docked on Terra. He still hadn't spoken to any of them when Sniff met them at the disembarking station and hugged him.

"I lost your ship," he told her, ignoring the gazes that drove into his head from the rest of the crew members of the *L'manburg*. He knew he'd been avoiding them—had locked himself in his cabin after hearing of his trial. He knew they'd tried to talk to him, but he didn't *want* to talk to them. Not when they would tell him to leave.

He was already going to be kicked out of Fleet school...what did they care for him?

"I don't care," Sniff said. "You saved your crew. That's what's important." And he smiled because she was his friend and forgave him.

"They're not my anything," he said, loud enough that, to his right, Tubbo winced. Sniff subsided into a sullen silence after that, but she did exchange a brief inclination with Phil.

The five of them had a trial that day.

Tommy knew that Wilbur tried to talk to him before they entered the courtroom, but he ducked out of the way of the Phantom, letting the Fleet guards bar Wilbur's way into that part of the courtroom.

There were seven people dressed in black robes, sitting behind counters made of dark wood. Tommy recognized one of them to be the Admiral—or, rather, the Vice-Admiral, who sat to the left of the middle seat.

He did not look behind him as the auditorium filled with people that he had grown to care for—and curious students as well. He stood in the middle, Lani and Drista to his left, and Purpled and Tubbo to his right.

It was like he was the leader of this. Technically, he *had* been the leader.

"This session has been called to resolve a troubling matter," the Admiral—the *actual* Admiral, the Rear Admiral, Tommy was sure—said. "Thomas Innes, please step forward."

He blinked as Tubbo gave him an encouraging smile, and the courthouse exploded into murmurs—because, of course, everyone knew *that* last name. "Present, sir," he said evenly.

"Cadet Innes," the Rear Admiral said. "You have been called in front of his council today on charges of failing to disobey an order and regulation—not once, but twice."

He huffed a small breath. "It was...technically once. Captain Philza never said I *couldn't* come on." Lani winced.

"Okay, fine," the Rear Admiral said, dipping his head slightly. "Still...boarding a federal starship?"

"I did do that," he allowed.

"Lani Underscore and Drista Taken," the Rear Admiral continued. "You also did this."

"Yes, sir," the two girls chorused.

"I convinced him to let us come in the first place," Drista continued. "He argued strongly against it, but then eventually let us because we were in a short time frame."

"And this ship...you stole it?" the Rear Admiral said.

"No," Tommy said. "My friend, Sniff, gave it to me."

"...Sniff?" the Rear Admiral asked. "There is no such person in our databanks." Tommy resisted rolling his eyes. There was no way that this guy knew *everyone*.

"That's my nickname, sir," a girl said, and Tommy glanced over his shoulder to see Sniff standing up in the audience. She met his eyes once as she folded her hands in front of her stomach and straightened her back under the gazes of the occupants in the room. "My name is Sni'yfyer'ich. I have Elytrian parents."

"Ah, of course," the Vice Admiral said, grinning slightly. "Yes, it is in our records that you have a ship."

"Had," she corrected. "It's gone now." She didn't seem that mad about it, either.

"Well, Cadet Sni'yfyer'ich, you can sit down now," the Rear Admiral said, and Sniff sat down without a second word. "So, let me get this straight. Your friend, Cadet Sni'yfyer'ich, lent you a ship, and you used that ship to sneak aboard the *L'manburg*—"

"Objection," Drista said, and Tommy breathed out sharply. "We didn't *sneak* on, sir. Junior Lieutenant Fundy beamed us aboard as soon as he heard our pleas."

The Vice-Admiral leaned in and whispered something in the Rear Admiral's ear, who nodded once. "Ensign Drista, while we appreciate your correction, we are merely trying to state the full story."

"Then get it right," Drista muttered, and Tommy was sure half the courthouse heard her.

"Now, Cadet Innes, you were aware of the transmission because of a misclick that Lieutenant Underscore—" Tubbo winced. "—sent while trying to send a picture of...a bumblebee—" There were some laughs. "—and connected the dots to the death of your father, the late Captain Sam of the *H.M.S Fran*."

"Yes," he said, his throat thick. "I...recognized the transmission as a trap, and because they were out of range, I sought to save...the ship and its crewmembers."

"Brave," the Rear Admiral allowed. "But stupid. Very, very stupid." Tommy looked down at his shoes. "However, I will give you this. Had you three—" He glanced between Lani, Drista, and Tommy. "—not warned the *L'manburg*, it would have fallen. So while you will be punished, I also commend you for your bravery, even if you stepped outside the rules while doing so."

That doesn't fucking make any sense, Tommy grumbled internally, but he stayed quiet.

"Now," the Rear Admiral said. "On to the second part. Shortly after you got into contact with the Arachnid known as Merikh Rience, Lieutenant—*pardon* me, Senior Operations Officer Tubbo Underscore, Quartermaster Purpled, and Cadet Thomas Innes knocked out Junior Lieutenant Fundy and beamed themselves aboard the Arachnid starship." Tommy noted that he'd left Lani out—nobody must have told him that Lani had been where Fundy had stood. That was good. "In doing so, you went directly against the orders of your captain, broke about fifty Galactic Rebellion regulations in the process, and nearly got the three of yourselves killed."

Purpled swallowed. "It was—my idea, sir," he said. "Tommy would have gone alone and sacrificed himself so that the *L'manburg* could go free." Tommy lifted his chin, seeing the Council members lean forward, some of them surveying him with little interest. "I...suggested that we blow up the

ship instead. So we had a compromise. Tubbo and I would plant bombs in the engine room, and Tommy would cause a distraction. Then we'd get beamed out. End of story."

"Except it wasn't," the Rear Admiral said. "There was a fascinating conversation that took place across the communications screen." Tommy stiffened, making eye contact with the Vice-Admiral, who—shook his head?

What?

"I don't see what sort of point that entails," Purpled said tightly.

"About the Red Planet's Genocide? About Pogtopia? Quartermaster, I think that makes *all* the difference."

"I think you're fishing for information," the magenta-eyed boy said furiously.

"Purpled..." Tommy murmured warningly.

"Peace, Admiral," the Vice Admiral said, putting an arm on the Rear Admiral's forearm. "I talked with Quartermaster Purpled after the incident occurred. The file is blocked."

Tommy saw it in his eyes, then. *Even from them*, the file was blocked.

Nobody knew.

Holy shit, nobody fucking knew—save himself, Purpled, Ranboo, and the Vice-Admiral.

"A third lives," the Rear Admiral continued, ignoring his colleague. "The leader of the Children's Rebellion. You know this."

"Yes," Purpled said, eventually, among the muttering in the crowd. Tommy was mildly uncomfortable about the conversation that wasn't entirely about him but also *was* about him.

"And you told nobody?"

"It wasn't important."

"It wasn't important—that *boy* is the only one that can fully recount the events of the Children's Rebellion!" Tommy closed his eyes and bit his lip, tasting blood. "Who can testify against the person that committed the mass war crimes!"

"You have the full story! Me, the cameras—you have the pieces and the full puzzle!" Purpled said, nearly shouting now. "You won't get him too! He wants his peace, so fucking *give* it to him! The moment you have Chroma in your hands, he will come—he will testify. He will." Tommy blinked. "But you don't have Chroma. You don't have hide *nor* hair of him, or his possible location."

The Rear Admiral looked at him for a second. The courtroom was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. "And what if I ordered you to tell me about him, *cadet*?"

Purpled's mouth was a thin line as he tore out the pin that signified the Galactic Rebellion and held it out in his palm. "Then I would resign," he said. "He was my leader before you ever were. He saved my life a thousand times over, and if I walked away so he would get his peace—then I would. Just like that." Purpled tossed the pin up and caught it, clenching his fist tightly. "Try me. You know I would." Unruffled admiration and awe filled Tommy as he stared at his gallant friend, who stared down the Admirals with silent fury and determination.

"And what of you, Cadet Innes?" the Rear Admiral said quietly. "How do you know of the Children's Rebellion leader?"

He started from staring at Purpled. "I know him," he said quietly. "Pretty cool guy, if you ask me." Purpled scoffed under his breath. "We were in prison—the Wasteland—together." It was...odd. Talking about himself, in the third person.

"And do you know where he is now?"

"Not there," he said honestly. "But I'm not telling you his name or what he looks like either. Purpled got the gist of it."

"Admiral, Quartermaster Purpled is right," the Vice Admiral said, and Tommy let out a small breath. "We have the full story. Let the kid have his rest. Let the cadets keep their secrets."

"Fine, Toast," the Rear Admiral said, and Tommy started at the nickname. "Keep your secrets too." He glanced at his friend. "I know you know whom we speak of."

"Of course," the Vice-Admiral—Toast?—said. "We've spoken, too." His gaze passed over Tommy without pausing. "I didn't push him because it was a traumatic experience, and the poor kid was refusing to tell anyone. I only found out because Quartermaster Purpled told me about him." Tommy smiled slightly.

"Cadet Innes," the Rear Admiral said, finally. "You are grounded for the next nine months from any missions that might come your way, training or no." Toast leaned his head in and whispered in his ear. "*Barring* your track meets, in which you will be under strict watch from your coaches." Tommy frowned. Wasn't he kicked out? "Senior Officer Tubbo Underscore. Your demotion is merely temporary, and when the *L'manburg* lifts off the ground after repairs in about two months, you will join them with your previous position. Until then, you will retain your current standings *and* will do fifty hours of community service until then. Quartermaster Purpled, you are also commissioned to do fifty hours of community service, *and* you will be going through old records and rewriting them. By hand. Ensigns Lani and Drista—you are grounded for four weeks. All five of you will also receive commendations for your work in saving a federal starship."

Tommy was surprised they got off so quickly. Nine months was a fucking long time, but he'd been surprised he hadn't been kicked out. Purpled looked slightly annoyed—Tommy remembered he'd expressed his distaste for paperwork—but Lani and Drista looked slightly relieved. Tubbo just looked cautious. Oh, well. The *L'manburg* would be fixed in two months, and then his friends would be off again—off to see the stars. Maybe when they got back, he could have advanced a few levels and gotten closer to his goal of completing Fleet school in under three years.

"Dismissed," the Rear Admiral said coolly, and with that, the courtroom adjourned.

Tommy stood there for a moment before walking out, ignoring the people that shouted after him.

He didn't know when he'd started to care about the Galactic Rebellion.

Before, he had hated it. He hated it because his parents had died for its *cause*, because of the people in the Wasteland that thought that their *cause* was magical and promising and good.

And then...he had come to understand that it was the Arachnids that were the menace and that *they* had killed his family, who made their own choices and allegiances.

He had followed them, far after they were gone. Sometimes he didn't know exactly what he was fighting for—but he knew that the Arachnids had long ago been the downfall of his species and the cause of the war. He knew of the Artifact, which the Avians had supposedly taken—that both sides searched for, one with destruction and malice and hate and the other with hope and desperation for an end.

He avoided the crew of the *L'manburg* for four days before they found him. Avoided their calls, their messages on his datapad—hung out with Sniff a bit but stopped when she told him to answer his calls.

"Tommy!"

Tommy turned from where he was walking in one of the Fleet school gardens, this one filled with early-spring cherry blossoms and pink petals that stuck to his hair and covered the pathways. He sighed inwardly when he saw Wilbur running towards him. "Hey," he said warily.

"We've been looking for you ever since you disappeared after your discussion with the Council," Wilbur said, panting slightly as he caught up to Tommy, his unruly brown hair tilting with the rest of his head as he regarded Tommy.

He snorted. Sure, the Phantom was, perhaps, correct. He *had* been avoiding the crew of the *L'manburg*, even Tubbo, and Purpled. He'd been studying in the library and had fallen asleep in there more often than not in the four days since they had disembarked onto Terra. He just...needed a break or something.

"I *was* avoiding you," he said. "And I plan to continue doing so, so fuck off." Tommy turned to walk off, an ugly feeling filling his chest as he made to move away.

"We never got to talk after what happened," Wilbur called after him, and Tommy froze. "You—well, you avoided us."

"Yeah, that's sorta the point, bitch," he snapped.

"Why?" Wilbur asked simply.

"Because I didn't want to talk to you," he said.

"Why?"

"Because—I thought maybe you'd leave," he admitted. Wilbur frowned at him. "I...yeah, I disobeyed a direct order, and I thought that you would force an apology out of me, but—"

"You're not sorry," Wilbur noted.

"No," he said stoutly. "I'm not."

"Good," Wilbur said, surprising him. "Tommy, you're my friend. Or—or whatever, annoying little brother, as Phil likes to call it. I care for you, okay? You saved my life. You saved *all* of our lives by doing what you did—it was you who intercepted Tubbo's misclick and *you* who figured out that it was a trap." Wilbur wrinkled his nose. "You potentially were giving up everything—Fleet school and a home on Terra—for us." Tommy stared at him. "Don't pretend I don't know that. Sure, Tubbo and Purpled did too—but they have things to fall back on. You don't. You don't have anyone."

"Ouch," he muttered.

"And—you chose to maybe give it up, for me," Wilbur continued. "For us. And—well, I appreciate that, you stupid gremlin child. More than you could ever imagine." The Phantom let out a small

breath. "Phil does too, and Techno, and Dream—everyone does. They know what you did. They understood what you were trying to do."

"What's that?" he asked warily.

"Save us," Wilbur said simply. "Save people who you barely knew—oh, don't give me that, you *barely* know us—and you did it without hesitation. Sniff approached us when we couldn't find you; and told us you were regularly attending track—good job, by the way—and she admitted that you'd dropped everything when you got Tubbo's messages and ran."

"So?" he whispered.

"So—so you didn't hesitate." Wilbur put a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "You didn't even *think* before rushing off to save us."

"I know," he grumbled, pushing Wilbur's hand off his shoulder, suddenly feeling cold despite the warm sunshine. "I'm stupid. I get it."

"No," Wilbur told him. "You're not stupid. You're the damn-well bravest person I've ever met. You're a fucking *hero*, Tommy. Plain and simple."

"Merikh Rience," Techno started.

Tommy glared at him from over the edge of his copy of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. How the fuck had this idiot found him after he'd fled from Wilbur in the gardens nine hours ago? It was one in the fucking morning. "Yeah?" he seethed. "What about him?"

"I talked to him," Techno said, talking about the Arachnid prisoner that Tommy had pushed out of his mind and pretended to forget about. Purpled had told him that he'd been transported back with the trio and taken prisoner.

"Okay," he said.

"He's Chroma's lackey."

"Okay."

"Chroma wants you."

A burst of fear flashed through Tommy before he stomped it under his foot and quelled it without blinking. "No shit."

Techno sighed, running a hand through his pink hair. Tommy tilted his head, suddenly wondering whether the half-Piglin dyed it or not. "You know, if it's anything to you, I'm not mad at you."

"I don't care about your opinion," he said through his teeth.

"That's a lie," Techno told him.

"I'm not lying," he said, lying. "Just—go back to your ship or something. I know you can, even if it's under repairs for the next two months. Fuck off. Leave me alone. Stop—stop fucking *bothering* me, and tell Wilbur to do the fucking same. You two are stalking me, and it's fucking creepy."

Techno stared at him for a second, and Tommy looked away, unsettled. "Do you really believe that?" Tommy opened his mouth but shut it after a moment. "Look, Tommy, when you appeared on the bridge and told us that we were all going to die if we didn't listen to you—never mind the fact that you're the son of Sam Innes—I didn't believe you."

"Thanks," Tommy muttered.

"But then..." Techno said. "Then you proved us wrong and then disobeyed direct orders with Purpled and Tubbo to blow up an Arachnid ship." He scoffed. "Good job, by the way. Lots of paperwork, but good job."

"You're not...mad?" Tommy asked cautiously.

"*Mad?*" Techno repeated, raising his eyebrows. "Tommy, *nobody* on the *L'manburg* is mad that you blew up the warship. They're only mad that you nearly died in the process."

"Because I'm reckless," Tommy muttered. "Yeah, I get it."

"You're not reckless," Techno told him darkly. "People that are reckless actually care about their health." Tommy stiffened. "Yeah, don't think I don't get it. You're not only *self-destructive*, but you don't give a damned about what happens to you."

He couldn't even argue. Because fucking Technoblade was *right*.

"Also," Techno added. "I won't tell Niki. But I'm keeping an eye on you. If I force Wilbur as well, that's two eyes." He smirked. "Or four."

"Why the hell do you care so much?" he asked.

"Because seven years ago, your father and your aunt sacrificed themselves so that my people could live," Techno said firmly, with no trace of sarcasm on his face—because he was dead serious. "And since I can't repay the favor to them, I'll save *you*."

"I don't need saving," he told Techno.

"Yeah, you do," the half-Piglin replied. "You're spiraling, and if I were a better person, I'd tell you to get some help because you're a thousand ways messed up, but I'm not a better person, and I know if I push you, you'll run and never look back."

"Hey, kid," Phil said quietly.

He slammed his plate down on the table. "How do you fuckers keep *finding* me? First Wilbur, yesterday, in the cherry blossom gardens—then Techno at the library at one in the morning—can I just be somewhere *alone*?"

Philza regarded him for a second, ocean blue eyes wary. "Mate, you're avoiding everyone. Even Tubbo and Purpled."

"So?" he said in a near-snarl, spooning cinnamon toast crunch into his mouth. It was a bit sugary for his tastes but still good. He scoffed when he realized that he had an opinion on *food*, now. Oh, how the...how did the proverb go? Oh, how the turns had tabled? Whatever.

"So your friends are getting worried," Phil told him.

"Oh, and do you include yourself on that minuscule list?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I included your father on my list," Phil told him, and Tommy started suddenly. "We went to school together, Tommy. He left on his fifteen-year mission and never came back. We were never *best* friends, but I would have considered us good friends." Phil looked slightly nostalgic. "You're a lot like him."

"Self-destructive?"

"No," Phil said lightly. "Smart. Caring to the point of *too* caring. Brilliant."

"You already said I was smart. That's repetitive. Come on, *Captain*, learn the language better."

Phil rolled his eyes. "I meant smart as in emotionally smart."

Tommy gaped at him. "Are you *kidding*? I fucking suck at emotions."

"Your own emotions," Phil corrected blandly. "You ignore just about everything."

"I insult everyone."

"On purpose, because you're afraid of making friends."

Tommy glared at him. Phil just looked slightly amused. "Who are you, my fucking therapist?"

"No, but you should get one," Phil told him.

Tommy scoffed. "No fucking way. Then I'd actually have to say *everything*, and people would give me pitiful looks, and I'd be arrested..."

Phil jumped slightly. "You've done things that would get you arrested?"

"I literally snuck onto two separate starships under thirty minutes," he deadpanned. "But no. I was joking. Sort of."

"Sort of," Phil repeated.

"Yes."

"I'm just going to ignore that," Phil told him. "Anyway, you don't have to get a therapist, Tommy. I do recommend it, though. Purpled and Ranboo and Tubbo all had one."

"Ah, so the children are fucked up."

"That's...not what I meant."

"I get it, big man, I'm fucked up too," Tommy snorted. "But there's nothing that I can do—hey, that rhymes!—so I just soldier through it." He brightened. "Did you see my amazing poem?"

"Yes, Tommy," Phil said dryly. "We are all aware of your terrible coping methods."

"They're great, just like me. I'm amazing. Shut the fuck up."

The Elytrian stared at him for a second, the only thing moving his feathers. "I can see why you're friends with Purpled."

"Because we're both amazing and cool and big men—I mean, obviously, I'm greater—"

"Because you both have superiority complexes," Phil interrupted, rolling his eyes.

"I thought I had a savior complex."

"Yeah, and narcissism."

"Isn't that a good thing?" he deadpanned.

"Mate—fuck—"

"I'm *kidding*," he said, only half-kidding. "Jeez, old man. Relax."

"Don't call me old. You're a literal child."

"Doesn't change the fact that you're old," Tommy said, pausing to loudly slurp at the milk that was left in the bowl. He saw the disgusted look on Phil's face and threw him the middle finger gleefully. "And I'm not a child. I'm the legal age of consent in some places on Terra."

"I did *not* need to hear that. Anyway, you're not Human."

"Isn't Avia uninhabitable anymore?"

Phil considered that for a moment. "Yeah," he said. "It was our sister planet for billions of years, and then—" he cut himself on. "I'll take you to see Elytra later. It's family movie night today. Want to come to watch?"

"I'm not part of your family," Tommy said instantly.

"You might as well be, for how many times Wilbur bitches about you, and Dream exclaims that you could replace him and he could go back to being the C.T.O.," Phil said, rolling his eyes. "The crew *is* our family. One big extended family."

"Great," he said. "I don't want to see a dumb movie."

He hadn't watched a movie in years.

"That's a lie," Philza said.

"I'm not lying," he said, again, lying.

Phil didn't blink, instead cracking a grin. "You're coming to movie night. I know you have a pass up to the *L'manburg*."

"I thought I wasn't—"

"You're not allowed to go on missions. We're watching a movie. I'll send Techno to get you if there are any problems," Phil said, as if it were final, standing up. "Good luck with your classes today. Oh, by the way, you have four missing assignments—get to it." Tommy gaped at him. "Tommy, I'm your guardian. The only messages I want from the school are from the teachers singing your praises."

"It's not *my* fault you needed saving."

Imagine having PTSD. Couldn't be me.

We all hate moral ambiguity

in some sense, and yet it is

also absolutely necessary.

In writing a story, it is the place

where I begin.

- Amy Tan

Tommy twirled his student I.D. card in his hands, giving a bored look at the officer who blocked his entrance to the transport over to the space station.

"Sorry, kid," the officer said, not sounding sorry at all. "That I.D. could be fake."

"I'm Tommy-fucking-Innes," he drawled. "Avian extraordinaire." That too had become a simple fact known throughout the school, and Velvet and Ant talked to him about it. He'd fibbed a bit and told him it made him a bit faster—none of the fancy science stuff to back it up. Tommy smirked when the officer moved to hide his unlocked datapad—one that had his face plastered on it and something about Captain Sam in the title. "Yeah, I ain't buying that," he drawled. "You fucking *know* who I am. Let me through."

"You don't have *clearance*—"

"I was invited for movie night on the *L'manburg*," he said, picking at the beds of his nails. "Maybe you're jealous of my epicness or something."

"I doubt that, nerd," Tommy heard someone say, and he turned, a tiny bit of relief filling him as Technoblade spoke, his pink hair tied in a braid down his back, his First Officer uniform pristine and sparkling. "But, officer, you might want to let him pass. He's already late." Techno tilted his head. "Of course, I could always get you into contact with Captain Philza? I'm sure he would love to talk to you about why you're holdin' up family movie night."

"Of—of course, Commander," the officer gulped, stepping aside. Tommy stuck out his tongue and flipped the man off. Techno put a hand on his shoulder and led him on the transport, pressing the button to close the doors.

"I hate people like that," Techno grumbled. "Stuck-up bastards."

"*You're* a stuck-up bastard," Tommy reminded him.

"Yes, but I'm a high-ranking official," Techno drawled, sitting down on one of the seats. Tommy sat down across from him, listening as the engines started and the ship took off, heading for the space station. "Hey, you know, not that I care or anything, but why were you late?"

"Hmm?" he asked, pressing a hand to the window and basking in the giddiness that followed as they left the planet behind, the beautiful waters and lush green plants fading into one blob. They passed the clouds, and Tommy leaned back, disappointed that he didn't get to see the rest of it.

"You're late," Techno said again, face bland and observing. "By an hour. So is Drista and Lani."

"Yeah, well," he said. "Shit happens."

"Can you just answer your messages next time?"

"We weren't allowed to use our datapads, 'n mine's dead anyway," he grumbled. At Techno's curious look, Tommy sighed and sunk lower in his seat. "We got detention."

"It's your first day back!" Techno said, incredulous.

"Yeah, well, shitty first day," he snapped. "Everyone knows I'm a fucking Avian and the son of Sam Innes. Sorta draws people's attention, you know?"

They didn't speak for the rest of the trip, and Tommy stared out the glass once more, watching as they approached the massive space station that docked the ships, one of which included the *L'manburg*—the ship in question surrounded by smaller ships as it was gradually repaired. Of course, Tommy wasn't stupid enough to think it was *that* easy. The frame would be the easiest to fix—other problems would be far harder to solve—the *L'manburg* had greatly suffered under the shield-ripping firing of Merikh Rience. Then there were diagnostics and testing, and...yeah, it would take a while.

"You're late," Philza told him as he walked into a room that he'd never been to on any ship, *H.M.S Fran* included. He frowned at the scene—it was an in-home movie theatre, the majority of the crew already in their seats, scrolling through their datapads. Purpled waved at him from the back—was that Sniff?

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he asked the girl incredulously.

"Phil got me a new ship and then asked if I wanted to stay for movie night," the Human said, rolling her eyes at him. "But you're late by like an hour. Fortunately, there are far more interesting people than you to hang out with in this place."

He snorted, plopping down in a seat next to the aisle, Purpled and Tubbo across the gap and Sniff to his right. Techno slunk over to sit next to Wilbur, who had a bucket of popcorn and a magazine in his hands.

"Where are Drista and Lani?" Tubbo asked loudly.

Tommy groaned. "We got detention," he said.

"It's been seven hours since I saw you!" Phil said. "What the hell, mate!"

"Wait, *Lani* got detention?" Tubbo said loudly. "I get Drista; she takes after Dream and his anger issues—"

"HEY!" Dream said incredulously. The two sitting next to him, Sapnap and a guy with brown hair that Tommy hadn't seen before, snorted loudly.

"—but Lani?" Tubbo continued, face confused in the darkened lighting of the theatre. "Detention?"

Tommy watched as Sniff grimaced; Survival Strategies, the class they'd gotten detention in, was only Tommy's second period. There had been some trouble with his first-period class—Human history—but there wasn't an Avian history class, and he'd opted to stay in it when asked because he *did* want to learn more about Terra. Sniff was in his fourth period, Advanced Subspace Geometry, and his fifth, Interspecies Protocol, so she had had the luxury of hearing him bitch about his shitty Survival Strategies teacher. He'd just...forgotten to mention that the three of them had gotten detention.

Whoops.

"She was an 'enabler,'" Tommy explained, making vague air quotes. Phil raised an eyebrow. "Look, my Survival Strategies teacher is a real arse."

"Is she, now?" Wilbur asked, finally looking up and adjusting his unnecessary circular glasses he refused to get rid of.

Tommy glared at him. "Yes, she—"

"I AM GOING TO KILL THAT BITCH!" Drista screamed, marching into the room, intention to kill written all over her face. Lani followed her in, looking slightly regretful. Dream jumped slightly at his sister's scream, turning around worriedly. By now, the occupants of the room were all listening.

"O-kay," Phil said, drawing out the two-syllable word, as Drista huffed angrily, her face red. "What the hell happened?"

"She was being an *asshat*, that's what—" Drista started, seething.

"Ms. Zahendia thought it would be a good idea to call Tommy out in class," Lani said reasonably, elbowing a seething Drista to get her to shut up. "About being an Avian, y'know. I thought it would be a question about his biology and the topic we were speaking about, but no." Lani let out a small breath. "No, it wasn't."

"What was it?" Techno asked when Lani didn't elaborate.

"Something xenophobic," Tommy grumbled.

"She did *not*," Phil said.

"She did," the three of them chorused. Phil looked slightly appalled.

"Don't worry, I handled it," Drista said sweetly.

"Not very well," Lani grumbled. "Drista jumped up and said something remarkably objectionable about the hair between her eyebrows—don't *give* me that look, Drista, you know I'm right—and had some very...creative ideas to where Ms. Zahendia could shove her bullshit."

There was a long moment of silence. Tommy thought that some of it was shocked.

"I sense it she didn't take it well?" Wilbur choked out, looking half-proud and half angry.

"Nah," Drista said. "She told me I didn't belong on the *L'manburg* and that the Council should have thrown me out." Tommy noted that Drista, now no longer annoyed, just seemed generally amused—a tactic that her brother shared. Philza looked ready to march off the *L'manburg* and give Ms. Zahendia a piece of his mind, though. "Apparently, I was too young and had somehow cheated my way into being a junior officer."

"I jumped to her defense," Lani said. "I was trying to be nice about it—"

"And then I said she was jealous that she wasn't as cool and amazing as the three of us and that we were teenagers and smarter and better than her old ass," Tommy finished.

"What the fuck," Techno deadpanned.

"In my defense, she deserved it," Tommy snorted.

"Also, don't message the school," Drista said, and Lani nodded. "We dealt with it. We can stand up for ourselves. I'm not really bothered by it. I get those comments all the time."

"Yeah, and Tommy gets the sleeping with someone one," Lani said dutifully.

"Shut the fuck up," he told the Shulker girl.

"What kind of *place*—" Philza said.

"It's school, Phil," Purpled said warily. "No school we've ever been to is perfect." He made eye contact with Tommy, who internally agreed.

"Yeah, sure, but teachers also shouldn't verbally berate their students with the intention to hurt or harm," Wilbur pointed out. "That's abusing a position of power."

"As if Techno doesn't do that too," Tommy pointed out, and Techno inclined his head. "Just—drop it, okay?" Drista made a noise of agreement, dragging Lani to sit on the right of Sniff.

"Hey, I'm Lani," the girl said with a bright grin.

"Sni'yfyer'ich, but you can call me Sniff," the Human girl replied, reaching out and shaking Lani's hand.

"Thanks for letting us borrow your ship," Drista said.

"Tommy already said that," Sniff laughed. "But you're welcome. Captain Philza actually invited me here so I could get a replacement but ended up encouraging me to stay for movie night." She looked slightly nervous.

"You're Human, right?" Lani asked her.

"Oh," Sniff replied, blinking slightly. "My parents are Elytrian, though."

"Adopted?"

"I—I mean, they didn't kidnap me off the streets," Sniff laughed, and Lani nodded.

Wilbur leaned over. "Are you wearing a *cow* sweater?" he asked incredulously.

Sniff blinked at him. "It's the peak fashion," she said defensively.

"No, I have the same one—I was curious because mine was hand-made."

"Yeah, so was mine."

There was silence.

"They lied to me!" Wilbur hissed.

"Okay, children," Phil said, amused. "Shut up so we can watch the movie."

"What movie are we watching?" Tubbo asked curiously.

"The Hunger Games," Purpled spoke up. There were some sounds of curiosity. "It's a twentieth-century film, but like we're watching the revamped version, so the special effects are better. It's pretty good."

"Yeah, after you stopped screaming," Ranboo muttered under his breath, and Tubbo elbowed him. Tommy was pretty sure that Purpled pretended not to hear the Enderian because the magenta-eyed boy didn't react.

"Fuck Gale, honestly," Niki spoke up from her seat in the front row.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Tommy asked.

"You'll find out," Sniff told him. "I think I've watched this movie once before."

"And if you have to go to the bathroom, just go," Purpled told them, and Tommy was confused why his eyes were explicitly on *him*. Did Purpled think he had a small bladder or something?

No.

No, Purpled had done this on purpose.

What a shitty friend.

Tommy let out a giant sob as he slid down the tiled wall, hands shaking as he tugged on his hair and pulled until it hurt.

That girl—that girl on the ground with flowers in her hair as the main character put her hands up in a sign that wasn't the same, but so fucking familiar it hurt. That girl, with a lifelessness in her eyes, as she faded; yet Rue had had Katniss to hold her as she died, and Alyssa and Foolish and Grian had died alone. He'd had to leave before it got any worse—he'd been *shaking*, stumbling against the wall, and had told Clementine to shut up when she asked what was wrong—he could not *breathe*—he was *dying*—

» Tommy, protocol says that you should breathe in, deep breaths. In slowly, through your nose. Then out, through your mouth. «

Clementine's voice washed over him, and Tommy listened to her, clamping a hand over his mouth and feeling the tears wash over his hand.

» Five seconds. One...two...three...four...five. There you go. And again, out through your mouth. «

For a computer, Clementine was comforting, and his vision cleared and he found that he could inhale properly.

He was fine.

This was fine.

Foolish used to walk him through his panic attacks. He'd gotten them back in Pogtopia—he and Ranboo had. Foolish would never say anything again.

The bathroom door opened, and Tommy glanced up to see Purpled standing there. "Fuck off," he croaked, trying to wipe away the fat tears that rolled down his face and erase the lump in his throat. His hands were still shaking, but the sudden noise had stopped the majority of its effects.

Purpled squatted down next to him. "Wow, you're seriously fucked up," he said in a low voice. And at that moment, Tommy despised him.

"I'm *fine*," he snarled in a half-sob. "And you're a fucking prick."

"You can't make it through a movie."

"It's not like other people weren't crying too," he said.

"They didn't have a panic attack," Purpled pointed out.

"This isn't a panic attack." Yeah, maybe he was lying to himself—but it didn't matter, nobody cared.

"Just—just *stop*, alright?" Purpled demanded. "Stop pretending that you're fine, and everything is alright because I see you every day and, you have this *look* on your face that makes you do self-destructive things." He tilted his head. "Are you ever even happy anymore?"

"Of course I am!" he retorted. "I laughed with—"

"That is not what I meant," Purpled said. "Tommy, I went through two years of therapy before I was even *remotely* okay, and I still go see Eret every month or so. *You* sat in a prison for two years and shut the world out, and even though you're safe, you still pretend that you are *fine*."

"I *am* fine," he snapped, attempting to quell the shaking in his hands.

"Shall I gather more movies where the main characters are forced to watch children die?" Purpled said, voice cold. "Children like Rue who were too young to die but forced into this situation because of a government—I *know* you blame yourself for their deaths, Tommy. Do you blame Katniss the same way?"

"What?" he asked, frowning at Purpled's comparison from him to Katniss Everdeen. "No!"

"So then why are you any different?"

"Because—that's a movie, and this is real life, and I should have moved to save someone," he said. "I—that was *my* hand sign that the children in the crowd held up, and it is *my* fault that they died."

"They chose to hold it up!" Purpled snapped. "You all thought you were going to die—you had no idea that Chroma would kill the rest of them for rebellion!"

One of the stall doors slammed, and Tommy looked up to see Tubbo standing there, face white, his brown hair tousled and nearly matching the shock and evidential horror on his face. Clearly, he had heard absolutely everything.

"Oh, shit," Purpled muttered, evidently realizing what a fucking idiot he was.

"You're the leader of the Children's Rebellion," Tubbo gasped out.

Tommy stared at him, unable to form simple words.

"Yeah," Purpled said before Tommy could spit out some stupid lie. "Yeah, he is, and you're not going to tell anyone."

"I..." Tubbo trailed off, glancing at Tommy. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he said.

"He's lying," Purpled told Tubbo instantly.

"I'm not lying," he said, following the familiar theme of lying.

"Whenever you say that," Purpled continued amicably. "You're lying."

"That's not true."

"Yeah, it is."

"Excuse me," Tubbo interrupted. "Can we just—back up a few steps?" He squinted at Tommy. "Are you fucking *serious*?"

"Um..." he said.

"You said you were in prison!"

"I was," he explained. "And then two years into the prison, Chroma came and brought me to—" Purpled narrowed his eyes at him as he choked on his words. "—um, to Pogtopia. And then I was put *back* in the Wasteland after I was recaptured."

"I was there," Tubbo argued. "You weren't on the planet!"

"You're right," Purpled said, snorting softly. "He wasn't. Because this *idiot* made the brilliant decision to chase after Chroma and got himself recaptured."

"Really?" Tubbo whispered.

"Yeah," he admitted. "I made Purpled and Ranboo go to the *L'manburg*, though."

"Dammit, man," Tubbo said. "What the hell?!"

"See, that was my reaction too," Purpled said. "Unfortunately, I had a delirious Enderian on my shoulders, and I was about to fall over and die from starvation too. So I was unable to anything."

Tommy reached out and grabbed Tubbo's hand. "You can't—you can't tell anyone."

"*What?*"

"You can't tell anyone," Tommy insisted.

"He's stubborn like that," Purpled said, flashing Tubbo a quick grin.

"I...you did this on purpose, didn't you?" Tubbo asked Purpled, who glanced at the ground. "I remember you were watching movies with Ponk and Punz and came out crying—you watched the Hunger Games, didn't you?"

"It was...yeah," Purpled said. "I'd watched the...the Pogtopia videos with Phil like two hours earlier, so watching Rue die wasn't fun." Tommy choked heavily, tears pouring down his face. "Ever."

"Yet you chose this movie," Tubbo pointed out, anger filtering onto his face as he took a step in their direction; where Purpled was half-crouching and Tommy was sitting with his back against the cool tiled wall.

"I did," Purpled admitted. His magenta eyes met Tommy's teal ones. "It was to prove a point."

"You sent him into a state! You *knew* it would affect him!"

"YES!" Purpled shouted, and Tubbo cringed slightly. Tommy stared at them, quivering from his position on the tiled floor. "I fucking *did* know it would affect him worse than it ever did me because he watched the other members of the Children's Rebellion die in person." A horrified light entered Tubbo's eyes, and he glanced at Tommy. "But I did it to prove a point. It wasn't right—not by morals or friendship—but he refuses to admit that there is something wrong with him."

"There isn't," Tommy choked out.

"*Normal* people don't get panic attacks," Purpled seethed.

"That isn't ethical by any means," Tubbo insisted. "You knew it would affect him, and you played the movie anyway."

Purpled laughed blandly. "If I leave a wound to fester and rot, Tubbo, nothing is going to change. I can cover it up and pretend that everything is okay, but nothing will improve—and eventually, I will die because of blood poisoning or something like that." He shrugged. "But if I want to treat it, and I don't have painkillers, I gotta pour hydrogen peroxide on it. Cleanse it of the nasty bacteria and all that."

Tommy watched as Tubbo slapped the Human boy across the face with the back of his right hand. Purpled didn't even try to dodge it, looking away after touching the redness on his face gently, and Tommy could have sworn that there was a little bit of apologeticness in his gaze.

"You're saying that forcing Tommy to have panic attacks is like pouring *hydrogen peroxide* on a festering wound?" Tubbo seethed, his hands balled at his side.

"No, but I'm saying the first stage of grief is denial, and Tommy is so deep in denial that the glowfish are getting to his head." Purpled's voice was still amicable and neutral, though he was not looking at either of them.

"You don't *get* to do that—" Tubbo started.

"Now, *hold* on a minute!" Tommy barked. "I'm not in fucking denial!" God, it was the golden apples all over again. He barely even got cravings for those horrid—delicious, mouthwatering—

pieces of fruit! He was over that! "I admit that perhaps you were right with the apples, but you're *so* very wrong about this—!"

"No," Purpled said. "I'm trying to prove it to you."

"It was one sad scene—"

"That you got a fucking panic attack over!" Purpled shouted, cutting him off so sharply that it was like a mental crack of a whip. "I know what went through your brain, Tommy Innes. I *know* what you saw. I saw it too." He stared at the magenta-eyed Human dumbly. "Their faces. Didn't you?" Tubbo was frozen, unwilling, or unable to contribute to the conversation—Tommy didn't know—his intrepidity in slapping Purpled had vanished. "You saw them die, like Rue to Katniss."

"Rue was buried in flowers," Tommy whispered. "They are nothing alike." Alyssa and Foolish and Grian had been tossed into pits covered in flies among other bodies. He had not buried them in flowers, painstakingly picking them for each person—he had never been able to.

"Helplessness," Purpled continued. "That's it, isn't it? That's what you hate? You have a savior complex—I'm not stupid enough to think that you don't. You watched as they died—" His breath hitched. "—and I'm not blaming you, but even *I* saw the hand that Alyssa put up before she was executed. A sign that *you* created—that signified the Children's Rebellion, and a motion that every single person in the crowd, *including you*, put up."

"THEY ALL DIED BECAUSE OF IT!" Tommy yelled, his voice bouncing off the walls, echoing like the heartbeat in his chest.

"THEN IT WAS THEIR FUCKING CHOICE!" Purpled screamed back at him. "Nobody forced them to put up their hands—Chroma was forcing them to clap at the executions of their *friends*! Don't you think that most of them thought they were going to *die* anyway? How were they supposed to know that the *L'manburg* would arrive later? They knew the consequences of rebellion, and they chose to go out *their* way."

"I ran," he said softly.

"You were fifteen," Purpled said. "You didn't have a weapon, you were malnourished, *starving to death*—you didn't think, even in my delirious half-sick state, that I didn't see you sneak the small handful of food that you rationed to Ranboo and me?" He shook his head. "You think that I don't regret greedily taking that food without realizing that it was *yours*, as I watched you waste away and was unable to do anything but be a fucking burden?"

"You were not a burden—"

"I WAS!" Purpled screamed. "And Ranboo thinks he was as well—" Tubbo startled, surprised. "—because while you and Alyssa and Grian and Foolish were *out* there, doing something, raiding warehouses for food that Chroma's men hid—that we did nothing but cower in that fucking cave and slowly dwindle? That Alyssa spraypainted her words upon the walls—"

"That was her?" Tubbo murmured.

"—that Grian flew until his wings no longer held him, looking for animals but found *nothing*, that Foolish turned into his Phantom-state—that *you* were there for all of it, and you stand there, the extra piece to a completed puzzle—and you think that you are *fine*?" Tommy stared at him wordlessly, hands shaking. "You are not fine. You are not the same person that you were seven years ago—and fucking *news flash*, you will never be the same again. You will always have these horrible memories in your head, and you will never rid yourselves of them again."

"I wish..." he trailed off.

"That they would go away?" Purpled said. "No, you don't. You want to remember the other children there because you are all that remains of them. While Ranboo and I lay suffering in those caves, it was *you* who communicated to them, and *you* whom Pogtopian children wrote in their datapads—rumors of a rebellion and a better place." Purpled shook his head. "Did you know that the Galactic Rebellion uncovered the mass graves and buried them, one by one? I went back about nine months ago with Ranboo." He glanced at Tubbo. "We never really went on shore leave to Snowchester. I—I had to see them. I thought—you know you have a fake grave there?" Tommy started. "Yeah, your name was on the list, but it was on the plaque of bodies that were never found." A tear traveled down Purpled's face. "There were so many. It's the same field that the six of us used to lie on our backs and talk about our futures."

"There were three thousand, two hundred, and seventy-three of us," Tommy whispered, the number flashing in front of his eyes.

"And now three remain," Purpled said softly. "One will never remember. I only know half of it. What about you, Tommy? You sit there, and you pretend that they were only dreams. You remember it, down to the smallest detail. It haunts your nightmares. It haunts *you*. A survivor."

"Is that what we are?" he snorted. A rhetorical question, of course, and Purpled caught onto that. "Because, you know, it sure doesn't feel like I'm fucking surviving sometimes." He stood up and shoved past Tubbo and Purpled, making for the bathroom door. At the last second, he turned and made eye contact with the young Shulker—who was crying? "Don't fucking tell anyone."

And with that, he was gone.

Tommy sat in his room on the *L'manburg*—Phil had insisted on him staying for the night; something about kidnapping, which was stupid, because he was seventeen, but he wasn't going to argue. He was already tired from arguing with Purpled and, sort of, Tubbo and had just slammed the door and refused to answer when anyone knocked.

He wasn't trying to sleep; his thoughts ran far too fast for that.

Maybe Purpled was right.

Nah, he'd be fine. Better people had gone through worse. He could deal with this. Besides, he didn't want to see a fucking therapist. It wasn't *that* bad. It had been years since the Red Planet and Pogtopia and Chroma; Purpled and Ranboo had already passed that barrier, and he was extraordinarily epic and cool, and he could jump over it like those people did in track—

A tear rolled down his face, and he raised his head.

"Clementine, access code four-zero-three-theta."

» **Of course, Tommy.** «

He watched as the small black cube on his table lit up with blue, holographic flat screens protruding up in a half-circle encompassing him from his position perching on the mattress. That cube was an accessor to Clementine and her vast stores of erudition and one of the many things that had been salvaged from the H.M.S Fran wreckage. That *specific* one on his desk had been locked, unlike the others, and ample of things anticipated for *him*. Phil had given it to him after he had screamed to the universe who he was and who his predecessors had been.

Until now, he had been anxious to touch it, propelling it to the back of his mind—like so much else—but he thought that maybe it would be okay now. Maybe.

Tommy reached out a shaking hand and swiped a few of the screens, sadness filling him as he looked at the captain's logs and the home videos of himself of a kid. He saw the video titles with his mother, of his sister, of his father—of his first steps, of his first words.

It was all there, and he was such a coward.

Trauma™

Chapter Notes

More fanart!

[@winter_arts](#) on twitter made some fanart [here](#)
it's so fricken beautiful!

[@pogiope](#) on twitter made some fanart as well [here](#)
based on designs by [@lizz_mer](#)
much <3 to both of you

if you choose to make fanart, tag me on twitter (@Aria_Cinabun)/instagram (@Aria_Cinabun)
and I'll link it in the next chapter notes! I love all of you!

**ALSO YES I DID CHANGE MY TWITTER @ >:D THE ORIGINAL ACCOUNT
OWNER OF ARIA_CINABUN GOT LIKE BANNED OR SOMETHING SO I TOOK
IT MWAHAHAHAHA**

Our dead are never

dead to us, until

we have forgotten them.

- George Eliot

"I noticed you didn't finish the movie last night," Sniff said quietly as they walked out of Advanced Subspace Geometry.

He ignored her, zooming in on a specific question for their math homework. "Do you know how to do problem forty-seven?"

Sniff gave him a wry look. "I'm not stupid," she said. "You showed me how to do that problem around minute twenty-three." Tommy frowned at her. "Stop avoiding the question."

He sighed, slumping slightly as they walked into one of the many courtyards. This one was less of a courtyard, as it faced the Golden Gate Bridge in all its gloriousness. Drista and Lani were already waiting for them, the shorter Shulker girl bearing tins of lunches. Initially, Sniff had refused the food that Karl cooked for them daily but had caved when she'd met the doe-eyed Human—especially since Sapnap had been glaring behind him, *daring* her to refuse.

"It's..." he said. "Complicated."

"Most things are," Sniff said, with a twist of her mouth.

"That movie reminds me of things I'd rather stay in the past," he admitted slowly.

Sniff slowed down. "Ah," she said. "I see. I suppose I share that statement. There are certain movies that I...abstain from seeing." She hesitated. "Some might say that I get flashbacks."

"Some might say that," he said with a slight shrug, biting his tongue from asking. She wasn't asking him—he had no right to return the favor. "I just think they're day-mares."

"What?"

"Nightmares, but in the day, and they're set off by current events."

"...that's just PTSD, Tommy."

"I don't have PTSD."

"The first stage of grief is denial." Now she sounded like Purpled.

"I'm not *grieving*!" he snarled, and Sniff laughed lightly.

"Grieving?" Lani asked, catching the tail end of their conversation. "Who's grieving? I know I sure am, after fucking *Gale* ." She made a face. "Fucker."

"What's wrong with Gale?" Tommy asked sincerely. "He seemed like an okay guy."

"He's a bitch," Lani said.

Tommy swallowed. "Ah. I see." He really didn't.

"You should."

"He's only a bitch in the other movies," Drista said, rolling her eyes as she handed Sniff and Tommy their tins. Tommy took his and opened it, tilting his head as he found teriyaki—Lani mouthed *tofu* when he raised an eyebrow at her—and rice. "He uh—well, you didn't end up watching the rest of the movie, did you?" Tommy shook his head. "Yeah, basically Katniss finds Peeta, and they put on this 'show'—" she made air quotes. "—but it's only sort of a show? Because Peeta is in love with Katniss? 'Cause the announcer guy says that two people can win if they're both from the same district, 'cept Peeta is dying in a cave—" Tommy flinched violently and played it off as a bug, slapping his neck. "—so they gotta play their part of star-crossed lovers, which they do pretty well until the airdrop sends soup. Then Katniss has to go to the Cornucopia to get *actual* medicine, and Rue's district partner saves her life from Clove."

"That's the knife girl," Sniff told him, stuffing rice into her own mouth as they sat below one of the trees, safe from the heat of the sun. Other students milled around—giving them looks because, well, it was *them*, but not near enough to hear their conversation. "She would have won had Katniss not had plot armor."

"Stop breaking the fourth wall," Drista snorted. "Anyway, Katniss gets the medicine, people die, blah blah blah. There's a whole-ass chase scene as the Capitol tries to whittle down the numbers, and eventually, it's only Katniss and Peeta left standing."

"And then they change the rules," Lani said quietly. "They make it so only one can win."

"Katniss threatens suicide," Sniff finished cheerfully. "With Peeta, I mean. So they let her and Peeta win that way they *have* winners, and the two of them are crowned champions of the seventy-fourth annual Hunger Games."

Tommy didn't think he liked that story. It was nothing like his own, and it sounded interesting enough—but he did not like that story because that government controlled the world, and children were forced to fight to the death for sport.

It was nothing like his own story, because of course, *he'd* never had to fight to the death—and never would, preferably—but the children that died reminded him of the Red Planet and Pogtopia and the genocide that followed. The children that were forced into that arena under pain of death—he assumed including the killing of their families—to *kill* each other, to turn upon each other. They had, too.

They had in Pogtopia as well. Enough to steal food for their little groups that eventually tore each other to scraps. Not enough to kill, though. They were children, but in the end, they *all* wanted salvation. There was no limit to rescues that could be given; no true winner.

Only two had gotten it.

(Only three had survived his story.)

He finished his rice, smiling at the three girls' conversation, arguing about some romance ship in an old Terran T.V. show that wasn't at all canon, nor would it ever be. He pulled out his datapad once or twice, exchanging a few messages with Tubbo and Purpled and Ranboo—mostly Tubbo, though, because his relationship with the magenta-eyed Human was slightly strained.

Tubbo, much to his surprise, hadn't told anyone. Except for Ranboo, but Ranboo was already aware, and the Enderian had held a conversation with Tommy this morning about the Red Planet. It hadn't been as *abrupt* as Purpled's had been—obviously, the Human had crossed a line—but Tommy did admit that, deep down, Purpled was probably right.

Very, very deep down. And only *partially* correct. Not even that much! Just a little bit. Tommy knew that Purpled realized that because while the Human didn't *apologize*, he had admitted that he'd overstepped his boundaries, which was at least something.

Purpled didn't apologize often, so clearly, the world was ending.

He went to Interspecies Protocol with Sniff after lunch, bidding goodbye to the two girls who were still arguing about the ship name—not a spaceship name, but a relationship name between two fictional men. It didn't make any sense to Tommy, but he didn't question it.

They were learning about Blazeborns this week—apparently, the planet was a monarchy, but not an absolute monarchy—sort of like England on Terra, Tommy learned from Sniff's notes. He sort of zoned out partway through the teacher's lecture, the elderly Kitsune explaining about the science behind the Blazeborn's unique fireproof ability. Tubbo would be more interested in such a subject than him. Sure, Tommy *knew* about biology—specifically his own—but it wasn't like he was overjoyed learning about it. Or the customs behind the certain fires that the Blazeborn lit on their pyres.

It was his next class that he was *genuinely* excited for, as he parted ways with Sniff, the girl rolling her eyes and promising to send Tommy her notes for the quiz tomorrow.

He popped into Flight Control with his bag across his shoulders and, for once, his datapad tightly tucked away as he scanned the room, looking at the occupants. They were doing simulators for the first time today, and sometimes Tommy thought that he'd done simulations before he could walk—which, of course, isn't true. Still, he remembered doing simple asteroid ones as one of his earliest memories, so his first one had to be when he was young.

Even Chroma's...relationship with him, as injurious as it had been, had not been able to sway him from his chosen path of a pilot. If Tommy was decent at something, it was being able to discern that he would *not* let his future career end with an Avian who had committed mass genocide. He would create new memories, and he would make better ones with better people.

The teacher, a male Elytrian who smiled at him affectionately as he entered, told the students—all twenty-three of them—to choose a simulator and create an account. Tommy had never created an account before—he hadn't needed to because his family had had their own aboard the *H.M.S Fran*. Still, he dutifully followed the teacher's instructions and made the name *TommyInnit* appear on the class's leaderboard.

"I don't care that you guys are all part of the same side, on the Galactic Rebellion," the Elytrian told them as the last person's name flickered on the leaderboard screen at the front of the class. "This *is* a competition for the rest of the year. I will teach you the controls if you need me to—which is fine, there's nothing wrong with that—or give you some tips if you wish, but you will be competing for the top three places in the class and out of the top seven, of Flight Control class." Tommy fought to keep the grin off his face. "The computer adjusts to your needs, and you can change the controls around and save them to your account, so when you sign in, the controls become whatever you wish. I won't force you to be on the same one for the sake of *fairness*. Fairness, in space, does not exist." The Elytrian shook his head, golden feathers ruffling. "Besides, on any starship you find yourself a part of, you can change the controls. Find a setting you like. Use the default setting. I don't care. The simulations change using a very intense A.I. system, and every time you fight the alien races, they learn how you fly."

A female Feline raised her hand, and the Elytrian pointed at her. "Fighting?" she asked.

"You think it would be running, Eci'nyue?" the Elytrian asked, and the Feline slumped slightly—Tommy frowned at her name. It wasn't Human; which was the usual go-to for Feline parents—nor, despite the obvious apostrophe, was it Elytrian. He shook his head, unsure why he wanted to know this so badly. "Sure, there are supply simulations and all that, but we'll do one simulation per class that you can redo as you wish until you're happy with your score. At the end of your class, it will add your highest score on today's simulation to the leaderboards."

"Out of a thousand, right?" Tommy asked.

"That is correct, Mr. Innes. The highest score you can receive is a thousand, though I do not think I have *ever* had a student get a thousand—" the Elytrian paused, turning a brown eye upon Tommy, who frowned at him. "—well, I suppose, besides your aunt."

"Ah," he said, smirking slightly at Puffy's prowess that had somehow lasted the ages. "She was a great pilot."

"Very bright student," the Elytrian agreed, and moved on. "The first simulation should pop up now. Close your simulators to get the best surround sound, and we can begin."

Tommy smirked as he watched the walls of his simulator close, encasing him in near-darkness save for the light that flickered on overhead and the controls that blinked to life. Tommy took a few

minutes to tune the controls to the suitable localities that he handled frequently—or had, anyway—and then he sat back in the seat and waited for the screen in front of him to load.

It had been years since he'd done this, and he still remembered like it was yesterday.

Tommy had to wear a jacket to walk across the Golden Gate Bridge after sundown, for it was windy and cold, and the air smelled like fish and salt. Barely any cars passed at this hour; perhaps a few—but not a lot, not compared to the daytime traffic.

"So," he said to Sniff, who walked beside him nervously on the pedestrian path. The red metal was a lot larger close-up, and when Tommy had touched it, was freezing cold. It was almost summer, too. "Why did you want to meet me here?" They'd met here before, of course. On walks, mostly. Just—talking about shit. Funny stories. Nothing too deep. Talks about Tommy being an Avian. Theories that were slightly dangerous and Tommy had wanted to find out about.

Sniff paused, putting a hand on the railing as she turned towards the ocean, where the sun had set. Tommy paused beside her, blinking as the wind assailed his face. It was sort of peaceful here if he closed his eyes and let the air blow against him.

"This is the Elytrians' favorite place to go in San Francisco," Sniff said, her fingers making *tap-tap-tap* sounds against the metal. Tommy raised an eyebrow, curious why she was so nervous. It wasn't like they hadn't been here before—though he hadn't known that Elytrians liked to come here.

"I'm hardly Elytrian," Tommy said, leaning over and peering at the water below. "Think I could glide to land from here?" He'd attempted to try it on one of the days that he stood on the railings, and Sniff had stared at him like he was batshit *crazy*. She'd pulled him back and threatened to rat him out to Phil if he tried it again.

"If you weren't an Avian, you would break your bones when you hit the water and drown," Sniff said calmly, staring up at the stars and the space station that wasn't visible from the ground. "Anyway, I heard you got a nine-hundred and seven on your flight simulation today."

Tommy cracked a slight grin. "Yeah, I'm pretty great."

"Sure, Tommy," Sniff said, her eyes crinkling as she smiled. "I—well, I'm new to Fleet school; this is my first term after I moved here from Elytra..." she trailed off, unable to finish. "I think that I might have quit track if you hadn't been there. I'm not one for yelling at people, see. Jacob would have pissed me off."

"Hopefully, Jacob is shoveling cow shit," he pointed out. "Sniff, why'd you ask me to meet here after dinner? I mean, it's not that I don't like hanging out with you, but you were so secretive about it."

Sniff coughed. "I'm—well, we all have our secrets. I wasn't exactly surprised to find out you were an Avian, though I didn't guess that. Whenever you ran, it's like you flowed through the air—which I suppose, you do." Tommy shifted, thinking of today's practice after school. It had been far more enjoyable without Jacob there, and Velvet had mentioned a possible track meet this weekend. "So you're not Human. You have Captain Sam Innes as your father, and Lieutenant Clara Innes as your mother and Co-Captain Cara Puffy as your aunt—those were your secrets."

"You have no idea," Tommy murmured, his words lost to the wind.

"And...." Sniff said. "Well, I think that you had every reason to lie, y'know, being an endangered species and all that." She tilted her head. "But—but I think that lying is bad, for me, and so I wanted to come here to say that I'm not Human either."

Tommy recoiled sharply, turning to look the girl in the face. She had a dreamy look as she stared up at the sparkling stars, and Tommy knew that she was telling the truth, that she had lied just as he had, that her *records* had liked just as his had. His brain shrieked in surprise, reaching out to her and—and finding nothing, but that didn't mean that she couldn't be—

"Avian?" he asked sharply.

Sniff laughed softly, shaking her head, looking at him with her pale blue eyes. "No," she said. "I think that you would have known if I was Avian even if I had told you straight-up that I was Human." In his mind, Tommy *did* know that—, and his brain shrieked again and withdrew back to

its sleep, but he is still sad that he had not found another of his species. "I am...not adopted, Tommy. I am Elytrian."

Tommy stared at her, his jaw falling open. He blinked slightly.

"You're going to ask why I don't have wings," Sniff said lightly. "And you're right. I'm not hiding them or anything. I just...don't." She let out a small breath. "I. I used to have wings. A long time ago. Never flew, though. I was too young to do anything more than glide." She laughed, but it wasn't a happy one, and there was a slight choking sound that came after. A horrible feeling filled Tommy, and he was afraid that he knew the truth. "I moved away 'cause I couldn't stand their pity. My parents, friends, and neighbors all looked at me, and they didn't see me for who I *was*. All they saw was the little girl who lost her wings." She shook her head.

"Do you miss it?" he asked her softly. "Your wings, I mean." It was sort of a stupid question, too, but he felt like he had to ask it.

Sniff considered that. "I mean...if I hadn't lost them, I wouldn't be where I was today. I went through a horrible depressive state for four years, see. Lost them when I was twelve."

"How?" Tommy said, immediately cursing his stupid mouth. "Wait, you don't have to tell me—"

"We're in a private place for a reason," Sniff said. "There are—there is this group of people, and they're kidnappers, and well...well, Elytrian wings pay for a lot, so they kidnapped me from the park, and they cut off my wings, and they left me to die." Tommy stared at her. "I was too stubborn to die, though, and so I lived."

"I'm..." he said. "Saying sorry doesn't really help, does it?"

"You must get some experience with people saying that," Sniff said, blinking in surprise. "But yeah. I suppose it doesn't." The—the *Elytrian* girl let out a shaky breath. "I think...I think I wouldn't have left home had I kept my wings. I think I would have become an artist, which is *fine*, but I would never have joined Fleet school and wanted to become an engineer and built mechanical parts. I would never have met you, or Lani, or Drista, or Tubbo, or Ranboo, Purpled, Phil...any of your crew."

"But don't you miss them?" he asked. "Your family. Your friends."

"Of course," she said instantly. "But they look at me, and they see that broken twelve-year-old girl who was in and out of the hospital for months and months. It took me years to move on, but I think they never did. My parents love me so much, but they blame themselves for not protecting me, and they've become helicopter parents." She shook her head. "I turned eighteen and got out of there. I love them, Tommy, I really do, but I can't...I can't deal with that. If I've moved on, they should have as well."

Tommy turned away from his friend to stare at the moving waters, trying to imagine a little Elytrian girl with slashes across her back because some bastards had cut her wings off.

"You're thinking really loud."

"Just..." he said. "It must have been painful."

"It was," Sniff said softly. "Sometimes, I dream about it. Sometimes I dream of flying. Elytrian kids start flying around twelve, see. In a few months, I might've as well." She shook her head. "I suppose that's why I wanted to join Fleet school, and consequentially, the Galactic Rebellion. So I can—save people, y'know?"

"I do," he said slowly, and made his decision. "If we're all about sharing secrets, I think I might as well."

Sniff frowned at him. "You have *more*?"

"Of course," he said. "I'm—well, I'm the leader of the Children's Rebellion, Sniff."

The Elytrian girl stared at him for a second, her face contorting in about twenty different expressions in half a second.

Tommy burst out laughing. "We're a sorry bunch, aren't we?" he said.

"I..." Sniff said. "Is that why you left after Rue died?"

"Yeah," he said softly. "Purpled chased after me. He did it on purpose, I think. Because I refuse to admit that..."

"...something is wrong," Sniff finished for him. "I think I understand that bit. Partially. I mean, I had my family and stuff, but *that* ..." she let out a shaky exhalation. "I was in denial for months and months before I realized that I was going to have to stop moping and do something."

"It's been two years," he said warily. "I don't think anything is changing anytime soon."

"I don't know your story, Tommy," Sniff said softly. "And you don't have to tell me more—that's fine. But I know that something happened that made it so you weren't rescued with Purpled and Ranboo, and it probably put you into survival mode. You didn't have time to think about—you know."

"The Red Planet's Genocide," he supplied helpfully.

"Yeah," Sniff said. "That." She hesitated. "It doesn't matter how long it takes, but I think...that Purpled is right. I mean, he *totally* went about doing it wrong, but you can't ignore this." Sniff tilted her head. "Talking about it with someone is good, though. Someone that wasn't with you."

"Tubbo knows," he said. "But he found out accidentally."

"Well, that sucks," Sniff told him. "But Tubbo cares for you. What about Wilbur and Phil and Techno? Isn't Phil your guardian?"

"Yeah," he said. "But um—they don't know."

"You don't have to give them any details quickly—"

"No, they don't *know*," he interrupted. "Like...at all. They don't know I'm a member of the Children's Rebellion or that I was at Pogtopia at all."

"That's...not good," Sniff said carefully, attempting—and failing—to keep the judgment out of her eyes.

"I don't want their pity," he admitted. "I don't want them to look at me and see anything different than who I am."

"I don't think they would."

"Your parents did with you," he said bluntly. Sniff stiffened, and Tommy sighed. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for."

"But true," Sniff said. "You are right in that. Perhaps they would treat you differently. You don't have to ever tell them, if you don't want to. It's your choice, in the end. But other people have always been essential at coming to terms with things—it's always harder, alone."

"Is it?" he asked softly. "I thought that it would be a burden."

"Good people like helping," Sniff said with a small smile. "And I think they care about you, Tommy. A lot. I think you fit in like a missing puzzle piece."

He lifted his head. "Really?"

"Really," the Elytrian girl said, satisfied. "Of course, I don't know you guys all too well, but from what I see..." she shrugged.

"Thanks," he said after a moment. "For not—I don't know, freaking out. I suppose you're the first person I've told so...trial run."

"It's not a problem," Sniff said softly. "I don't mind, really. Thanks for—not acting differently either. I mean, I know that you won't be the *same*—you understand, now, and that's a change, but you don't treat me like I'm broken glass." Sniff tilted her head. "Hey, I have a question for you."

"Yeah?" Tommy asked.

"It's hypothetical," Sniff said. "But—if you died, where would you want to be buried?"

Tommy considered that. "Why are you asking?"

"Because it says a lot about a person," Sniff admitted. "Where they feel at home, and who they are. What they want to be buried with—because after they're gone, it's the people that come after that deal with the loss."

Tommy let out a small breath. "I think," he said. "There's this database that the A.I. on the *L'manburg* holds. On it, there's a list of completed missions, which Command knows about, and then there are the ones that Command doesn't know about, which I can't even access on my own." He shook his head. "Before—before the Arachnids blew up the *H.M.S Fran*, and before the Piglin transport, my dad and my aunt were looking for something." Sniff glanced at him, curiosity sparkling in her eyes. "It was...I think it was a planet. I—I just thought it was some random mission until Merikh Rience came along and interrogated me on the location of the Avian home planet."

"You think it exists?" Sniff asked, having already been debriefed on that whole thing, even though it had been a secret. It had been her ship that had been lost, after all.

"I think I wasn't sure," he said. "But the Vice-Admiral said that other Avians *do* exist, and we can't all be gone, right?" There was a hopefulness in his own tone that he hoped Sniff didn't hear. "Maybe—maybe it's real. Or maybe it's not, and it's like the Artifact that both sides search for over and over again."

"Maybe the planet *is* the Artifact," Sniff said.

He shrugged, considering that. "I don't know. But—if I died, I think I'd like someone to go and bury me there."

"Not with your family?"

"Their graves are false," he said. "Their bodies are lost to space."

"Ah."

"What about you?" he asked her curiously.

"I think I'd want to be back at Elytra," Sniff admitted. "As much as I hated that place afterward, it's pretty and well...it's my home, even after everything. Maybe the mountain ranges or some hidden valley. I've always loved the snow and the grass." She shook her head. "Cremated, though. And somewhere nice. Where the cities aren't, and where I can finally learn to breathe."

He didn't mention the graves that Purpled had told him about. The graves of three children with stars and banners adorned upon their cold, dark tomb.

A part of him wanted to return there, should he die.

A part of him missed the golden glade that he would never see again.

When nothing goes right...go left (I am so alone)

When I leave this world,

I want to regret nothing.

- Aria Cinabun

"Phil," he said, holding out his datapad to the Elytrian and trying not to imagine similar wings on that of his friend. His friend, whose scars he had *seen*, two giant gashes across her back and a sad smile on her face. She said it doesn't hurt anymore, but Tommy knew she was lying—even if it hadn't hurt physically, it had to have mentally. Probably still did.

"Yeah, mate?" Phil asked him, looking up from his own datapad. They were standing—well, Tommy was standing; Phil was sitting in the captain's chair—on the bridge after school, and after Tommy had taken a shower, his hair still slightly damp and plastered to his forehead.

"I have my first track meet this weekend," he told him. "Uh—I need you to sign off the permission form."

"Oh?" Phil said. Wilbur glanced up from where he was translating something, eyes glittering with interest.

"You know..." he said, shuffling his feet. "Because you're my guardian and all that shit?"

"Aww, little Toms needs to get his permission formed signed to go on a field trip," Wilbur purred, face twinkling with merriment. Techno huffed loudly, not even looking up from the holo papers he was reading—almost sensing the argument.

"Bitch, you *wish* you were on Varsity track," he snorted. Wilbur had the audacity to roll his eyes, spinning around in his chair.

"Red and Ant will be there, right?" Dream inquired.

"You know them?" he asked curiously.

"Yeah," Dream said. "We did Manhunt together a few years back when I attended Fleet school." Tommy had no idea what that meant, but he also didn't want to hear Dream ramble on and on about his accomplishments, so he pretended to understand.

"Yep," Tommy answered finally. "They're pretty chill. When they're not flirting."

"The worst thing I ever did was help set them up," Dream grumbled good-naturedly.

"You'll be gone for the weekend, right?" Wilbur asked.

"Yeah," Phil said, scanning the contents of the permission form.

"Hmm," Tubbo spoke up. Tommy had no idea if they were still on good terms, but it seemed like they were just ignoring that that conversation in the bathroom had ever happened. "Which planet?"

"Ah—the Evo system," Phil said. "Eh. It borders neutral space."

Tommy rolled his eyes. "*Neutral* space," he pointed out. "Not Arachnid space."

Tubbo raised his hand. "I played them," he said. "It's not like nobody's ever been there before, Phil. They're a colony of Felines and Merlings."

"I'm aware, I've been to the Evo system," Phil said. "Are you *sure* you'll be okay?"

He rolled his eyes, watching as Phil used his finger to sign off on the line and grabbed it back when the Elytrian proffered it to him. "I'll be fine. I'm just going to *destroy* them."

"I'll be sure to tell Sniff that," Phil said, sounding amused. "She'll look after you."

"She's my friend, not my babysitter."

Wilbur snorted. "Sometimes you need one, you baby gremlin child."

"I'm *not* a child!" he said, sounding pitifully whiney.

"Phil, when does he leave, again?" Techno asked. "I'm tired of him and Wil arguin'."

"Tomorrow," Tommy said in annoyance. "That soon enough for you, bitch boy?"

"Not soon enough," the half-Piglin grunted.

Phil flicked a hand. "All three of you need to stop acting so childish. Wilbur, stop antagonizing him. Technoblade, act like an adult. Tommy—stop purposely annoying Wil and Techno."

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Not my fault they're stupid and dumb."

"You're such a fucking *child*," Wilbur snorted.

Tommy flipped him off with both his middle fingers, purposely raising his voice to a high-pitched tone as he did a poor imitation of the Phantom Lieutenant. "Meh meh meh meh, my name is Wilbur and I am a bitch boy."

"Oh my God," Phil sighed, rubbing his forehead as Wilbur opened his mouth to respond. "You're giving me a headache."

"It's his fault!" Tommy and Wilbur said at the same time.

"You guys are gonna be the death of us all," the captain groaned.

Techno raised a hand. "Please," he said. "Kill me now. I don't wanna have to listen to those two idiots."

"*I'm* not an idiot; you're an idiot!" Tommy shouted. "And—and a moron! And a fool!"

"Are you talking about yourself?" Wilbur asked mildly.

"Shut up, bitch—"

"Oh my God," Phil said again.

"Die," Techno deadpanned.

The ship to the Evo system was nothing like the *L'manburg*—nothing like the warship, or auxiliary ship, that it was. It was obviously made for transport, though the logistics remained the same—bridge, engine room, mess hall, blah blah blah. Tommy saw his friends off, hugging Tubbo and flipping off Wilbur before grumbling at the fond hair ruffle he got from the Phantom in turn. He almost missed the hand when it vanished as Phil bid him good luck, and Techno told him to win, or Phil would disown him. Purpled was there too, but Tommy purposely ignored him and ducked out of Niki's way as she tried to inject him with some more hyposprays for space vaccinations that she listed off on all two of her hands and then some.

"Overbearing family?" Sniff said with some amusement as he attempted to fix his hair in the metal bar.

"They're not my family," he grumbled.

"Uh-huh," the Elytrian said as she waved to Phil cheerily. Tommy stuck out his tongue at them as the transport shuttle took off towards the carrier ship. "Sure."

"They're *not*," he insisted, waving away Ant and Velvet as they herded them aboard the *U.S.S. Midway*, named after some island or something—Tommy hadn't been listening when one of his track mates had gone on and on about the historical name behind it.

"Wilbur's like your annoying older brother, don't lie."

"He's a bitch."

"Exactly."

There were seventeen of them total on this trip, and Ant introduced them to the bridge crew, who waved at them before returning to their job of getting them safely to the Evo system. The Feline then herded them towards the guest quarters—Tommy had to admit they were far smaller than his had been on the *L'manburg*, but he wasn't so over the Wasteland that it felt sweltering. Tommy threw his overnight bag—that's what Phil said it was, and it consisted of about four different outfits that his...well, his *guardian* had packed for him, along with two different pairs of running shoes—just in case he set them on fire, Phil had said, though Tommy hadn't thought that was quite realistic—a few reusable metal water bottles, and a medkit. The last had been Niki's addition, and the Merling had given Sniff strict instructions that if he showed any signs of relapsing or any of the like that Sniff "inject"—read: stab—him with specific hyposprays. Sniff had listened with a silent glee on her face, and he had resolved to not go anywhere near apples, let alone golden apples.

Tommy sat down on the bed and pulled out his datapad, checking the messages he'd received.

Tubbo

↳ *Bye, Tommy*

D:

miss u

He responded to that one with a fond smile and a reassurance and a note about Tubbo's clinginess.

Tommy Innes (Big Man)

↳ *You're so clingy, man*

Tubbo

↳ *>:o*

The following message in his inbox was a bit more complicated, and Tommy hesitated before clicking on it, sighing to himself.

Purpled

↳ *If it's worth anything, I'm sorry.*

I overstepped. I'm sorry for pushing you.

Tommy Innes (Big Man)

↳ *You're not sorry for saying it, though, are you?*

Purpled

↳ *Nah, but that's because I'm right.*

Tommy Innes (Big Man)

↳ *...see you in three days.*

Purpled

↳ *See ya, man.*

And he smiled because even if they hadn't had an awkward conversation in *person*, it was at least something—a step in the right direction.

Techno (The Blade)

↳ *Destroy some orphans for me.*

Tommy Innes (Big Man)

↳ *Why the fuck is that your name????*

Techno (The Blade)

↳ *Your name is even more cringe than mine*

Imagine having to state how epic you were

Couldn't be me

cringeeeeeee

Tommy Innes (Big Man)

↳ *Shut the fuck up*

Techno (The Blade)

↳ *nvm I hope you lose to the idiots*

Tommy Innes (Big Man)

↳ *Blocked.*

Techno (The Blade)

↳ *Finally, some peace and quiet.*

Tommy Innes (Big Man)

↳ *YOU MESSAGED ME FIRST*

BITCH

Techno (The Blade)

↳ *cringeeeeeee*

The *U.S.S Midway* took off into the stars in its four-hour journey to the Evo system, jumping into warp-three, and Tommy smiled because he had people that cared about him.

Wilbur Soot

↳ *gremlin child*

answer

Tommy Innes (Big Man)

↳ *wtf do you want*

Wilbur Soot

↳ *hahaha you're a bitch*

Tommy Innes (Big Man)

↳ ?????????

?????

fuck you

Wilbur Soot

↳ *hahahahahaha*

gremlin child

And Tommy watched as his datapad lost connection to Terra—and he smiled because Sniff was right, though he would never admit it. Tommy smiled because he had a family again.

But his name was Tommy Innes.

And nothing ever went right for him.

It started out as a feeling in Tommy's chest three and a half hours after launch. His eyes shot open, and he sat up, glancing at the time. 2310 Standard hours.

"Computer, lights at eighty percent," he said loudly, and the A.I.—nothing like Clementine, but an A.I. nonetheless—complied, the lights brightening. Tommy blinked, trying to dispel the black dots that danced in front of his eyes. He frowned, trying to think about what could have caused the pit in his stomach.

He wasn't nervous about the meet, was he? Nah, he was Tommy Innes. He wasn't nervous about anything. A lot of things. Most things.

Tommy padded to the door and opened it, revealing the dim nighttime lights of the corridor. Not two seconds after he did so, the room across from his opened, and Sniff's eyes met his.

"Hey," he said softly.

"Do you feel that?" the Elytrian girl whispered back. "There's—tension in the air. Almost like something is going wrong."

"We're not there yet..." Tommy trailed off. "We're still in warp, Sniff."

"Can you hack?" Sniff asked, drawing out her datapad. "I want to check a few things."

"I can get *expelled*—"

"You know the feeling that says that everything is about to go astray?" Sniff interrupted. "Well. Just—please?"

Tommy sighed and reached for her datapad. "I'm not that good," he warned her.

"Didn't you hack into the Wasteland?" Sniff asked him, raising an eyebrow. At Tommy's confused look, she elaborated, "Tubbo told me."

"Course he did," Tommy grumbled under his breath, opening up the command prompt and typing in a few things, his fingers flashing across the pad. "Wait, what did you want me to do?"

"Check the logistics," Sniff said eagerly. "Like—the shields and engine room and shit."

"Ah," he said. "That's not really hacking. That's just making a new connection to the ship's—" he cut himself off. "Yeah, I can do that." Sniff smirked at him, leaning against her doorway.

The ship shuddered, and Tommy yelped as the *U.S.S Midway* left warp at such a horrible speed that the logistics screen he had gotten into flashed a brilliant horrible red.

"Holy shit," Sniff breathed out, her eyes wide. Tommy handed her back the datapad as she scanned it. "Oh my God—we're under fire—"

He gritted his teeth as the shouting started, as the doors opened and his track mates asked what was *wrong*, as the ship shuddered and he watched the shields decrease upon Sniff's screen—

"Why isn't the captain doing anything?" he asked.

Sniff looked up at him slowly as the ship shuddered, and he saw something detach on the blueprints of the ship as it flashed red—

"Because the bridge was destroyed," she said hollowly, and Tommy nearly slumped against the wall as he stared at her in shock. She turned the datapad to show him, and he saw the bridge was—was *gone*, and the emergency doors were shut—that there were fire and death and the attacking ships were continuously *firing*—

"The engine room was hit," Sniff breathed out from next to him, tapping to enlarge it and zooming in on some bit that Tommy didn't understand. "It's going to blow."

"Why are they doing this?" he asked desperately.

"I don't know, but in five minutes, we're all going to die," Sniff said, grabbing his hand and dragging him down the hallway. "I—I know how to fix this, I think."

"Right," he said, trying to swallow back the panic in his chest. "Tell me how—"

"*I'm* the engineer, not you," she snarled furiously as they headed down a flight of stairs, running past people who had their phasers out, heading for escape pods—yes, escape pods—

"You should just save it for the actual engineers—"

"THEY'RE ALL DEAD, TOMMY!" Sniff shouted, and Tommy blinked at her, faltering slightly, bile rising in his throat. "They're all dead—the crew quarters and the bridge was attacked. If they aren't, then we're on the same page. If we get there and they're working on it, *fine*, that's fine." She shrugged. "But if they're not..."

"Just enough time for everyone to get out," he breathed. "Can you do it?"

"Yes," she said surely. "I—I think I can."

They made it to an engine room; a place that Tommy had never really been before, full of metal grates and tubes and things he did not understand—he was a fucking pilot, and Sniff was the engineer-in-training—she took him to a door and tapped in a code with shaky fingers, pushing the datapad to him.

"Go," she said. "You can't come here with me."

He glanced at the sign, going pale. "Sniff—that's radiation."

"I know," she said. "But I'm Elytrian, remember?" No, actually, he hadn't known that Elytrians were immune to radiation. "We can withstand that for a few minutes." Oh. "All the time you need to get out."

"No," he said. "I can—I can run—in there—"

"You will die."

"So will you!" he roared, furious, tears pricking at the corners of his eyes.

Sniff stepped beyond the glass door, and he grabbed for her, *missing*, and it slid shut, and she pressed a hand to the glass. "I'll come back, okay?" she whispered, as smoke hissed around them and lights flashed red—evacuation—and the ship shuddered, and he watched as the shields went lower and lower in that percentage.

"You'd fucking better," he said. "That's a promise."

She smiled at him. "Pinky swear," she said, and then the Elytrian girl was gone, and Tommy didn't move, didn't go to the escape pod that he was supposed to—because he could not leave her when she could live.

Just like the day of June fourth, 1942, Midway was in flames. Ironic, he supposed.

He could not leave. He would not leave. He could not leave his friend to die.

And so he waited.

The Arachnids—he supposed that's who was attacking them; nobody else fucking would—ceased firing, and Tommy didn't know *why*, didn't care, as the screen of his datapad flashed a warning saying that the engine was going to explode and the entire ship was going to go up in *smoke and flames*—

It stopped. Just as the Arachnids had stopped firing, the ship stopped attempting to blow itself up, and later Tommy would find out that the *Mira*, the Vice-Admiral's ship, on its first test run in years, had come to save them after receiving the distress call and had destroyed the attacking Arachnid ship. Later, he would find out that there were forty-seven casualties, including the entire engineer team and the bridge.

But later wasn't now, and when Sniff reappeared around the corner, he nearly cried with relief as she limped—*why was she limping?*—and sat down in a heap next to the door, leaning her head against the metal walls. Her skin was an awful shade, the veins prominent and a deathly green.

"You made it back," he whispered, kneeling by the glass door and pressing the button.

It didn't open.

Horror swept through him, fast as a raging wildfire.

"The airlock recycle sequence isn't done yet," she whispered to him, voice slightly muffled, her lips chapped and cracked and—were her eyes paler? "If you open it now, the entire ship will flood with radiation, and we will die."

"You're fine," he told her, refusing to let his voice shake. "I'll get you out of there." There was fear in his voice, and the pit in his stomach only grew wider.

"Yes," she said pensively. "I suppose you will."

Later, Tommy would find out at that exact moment that members of the Galactic Rebellion were boarding the ship, tending to the wounded and beaming them aboard the *Mira* for medical aid. Later, he would find that the emergency exit was nowhere near the engine room.

But later wasn't now, and he pressed his hand to the glass and realized that Sniff was dying, that her time of immunity to radiation was over and gone—perhaps it had been for a while.

"No," he said. "No, *no!*" he screamed to the ceiling, and he refused to believe that she was fucking *dying* in front of him, and he could, once again, do absolutely nothing. "You lied to me."

"Yes," she told him stoutly. "I did." Regret was not evident on her face—Tommy did not have the heart to force her to apologize for something she wasn't sorry for.

He scrambled for the datapad, shutting the engine room's airlock doors with one messy tap of a button. The scans screamed at him not to open the glass panel—he overrode it in two quick taps of a button and nearly fell to the ground as the door opened. Tommy caught Sniff as she fell into his arms, and he sensed the sickness catch him, cradle him with carelessness and seep into his bones.

"You can't die," he said, brushing the hair away from her face as he cradled her to his chest. "You—no, you *can't*—"

"Some things were just never meant to be," Sniff said, her eyes blinking shut. He felt her pulse falter under his hands. Once. Twice.

"NO!" he screamed, his voice faltering. "YOU CAN'T!"

As if screaming into the void would do anything.

As if screaming would *fill* that void.

"I can't fight death," she breathed out, another broken body in his arms—another friend he would not save. Tommy let out a broken sob as he brushed her hair away so he could look into her eyes. "I won't win. I just—" she coughed, once, and he was horrified by the blood that shone on her lips. "—I just want to see the stars again, in the bac-background of cl-clouds. Watch the moon rise. Can you—can you do that for m-me?"

"No," he said, tears flowing down her face. "No, *fuck*—"

"I—I want to fly again, Tommy," she whispered with a faltering breath, and then Tommy stared in shock as her heart stuttered and failed in front of him, in his *arms*, and she went limp, her eyes

staring up at a ceiling that she would never see again.

Tommy tilted his head back and screamed.

Later, the medical team would come in with radiation suits and find him there, sobbing over the body of his friend, and they would drag him away to the medbay, unclenching his hand from hers, and they would take Sniff and try to revive her on the cot over, but it would not work. He would sit there, and he would watch as they stepped back and told him they were *sorry*, but apologies wouldn't fix a broken Elytrian, who had already lost so much—and had saved so much, and he wanted the world to know.

Later was not now, though. and all Tommy could do was scream his pain to a radiation-filled room, uncaring if he died or not.

She would never breathe again, and something in Tommy died with her that day. Something in him broke for someone that could not be saved—had lied to him, had *known* her demise was eminent, and chosen that future anyway. She'd saved him...at what cost? At what cost—she'd left behind a grieving family and a sobbing friend. She'd created a legacy built on final words and feathers, and Tommy knew he would never believe anyone's last promises again.

Perhaps, in the end, it was never meant to be, for the most painful goodbyes were the ones never said and the ones never explained—an emptiness, a yawning gap that would never again be filled.

Another person lost, another oath broken.

Another friend dead.

Another life lost to the vastness of the universe.

Another star in the endless sky, another pinprick of light in the afterlife—another tick in Tommy's wrist.

Another person he failed to save.

Aim for the stars and the sky

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Grief is the price we pay for love.

- Queen Elizabeth II

Phil was awake when he got the call from the Vice-Admiral. He scrambled out of bed, turning on the lights and stifling a yawn as he patched the connection through. "Admiral," he said in acknowledgment.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Captain," Toast told him, looking more tired than ever, heavy bags under his eyes.

"It is of no problem," he assured the Vice-Admiral. "How did your test flight go? I heard you got your crew back together on the *Mira*. Congrats."

"And just as one of your first missions went poorly, so did mine," Toast told him, running a hand through his unruly cropped black hair. Phil felt his feathers ruffle as he prepared for the worst—why would Toast call him at half-past eleven if it had nothing to do with him? "We received a distress call from the *U.S.S Midway*."

Phil felt all time flow to a *halt*, and something in his chest seized. Tommy—that was Tommy's ship. "Is he—" he started.

"Forty-seven casualties," Toast told him, and that, in *no* way, made him feel better. "It is...complicated. The Arachnids attacked in neutral space, to a transport ship, no less." He rubbed his eyes. "Had we not gotten there in time—the ship would have detonated. It would have ignited anyway, if not for an Elytrian girl who was, fortunately, studying engineering at the time, and replaced the downed engineering unit. She uh—she didn't make it, though."

Phil's heart went out to that of one of his people, a silent prayer for her to fly among their ancestors in a happier place. "Can I..." he said. "Is Tommy...?"

"Recovering from radiation poisoning in the medbay," Toast told him, fucking *finally*, and Phil breathed out a sigh of relief. "Fortunately, in this modern world, we can fix that in a jiffy—and luckily, he was only exposed for about seven minutes. I'll send you the coordinates now." Phil nodded, slamming his hand on the emergency button that would awaken his crew. "Oh—and Ensign Drista and Ensign Lani's bans are lifted. Lieutenant Tubbo may reclaim his former position."

Phil nodded again hurriedly and ran out of his room. Techno was already on the bridge, the half-Piglin already looking awake and refreshed.

"What's goin' on?" he asked as Wilbur stumbled onto the bridge, followed closely by Dream and Tubbo.

"The *U.S.S Midway* was attacked," he told them, and Tubbo looked up so sharply that that had to have hurt his neck. "Dream, the coordinates are at your station." To his credit, the blonde-haired Human didn't blink—though he did blanch—and sat down, setting in the controls right away. "Highest warp you got."

"Yes, Captain."

"Is Tommy okay?" Tubbo demanded.

Phil closed his eyes. "He's alive," he said, and there were five exhales of relief from his bridge crew. "Tubbo, you're reinstated. Orders from the Vice-Admiral. Dream, punch it."

"Yes, Captain."

Twenty-eight minutes later, they appeared in the middle of dark space. Phil rose to his feet as he saw the small slew of transports leading from the fiery wreckage of the *U.S.S Midway*, his breath

catching. The *Mira* hovered nearby, taking in the small transports and sending them out again. Probably looking—or receiving—survivors.

"Ironic," Techno murmured. "That name."

"Shush," Wilbur hissed. "Now is no time for irony." Techno fell silent, for once. "Phil, should I obtain contact to beam aboard?"

"Yes, yes," he said, as he hid his shaking hands behind his back, looking at the small explosions that bestowed the transport ship. The *Mira* loomed in the background, tiny shuttles going back and forth from the carnage. In the distance, he saw the wreckage of the Arachnid ship—blown to bits. There would be no rescue for them.

Dream stayed on board, much to the pilot's chagrin, and Phil, Techno, Wilbur, and Tubbo were beamed aboard to the *Mira*, the noises of shouting and screaming assaulting Phil's ears. His wings twitched in distaste, his instincts wanting them to curl around him until the noise ceased, but he swallowed them down and made his way towards the medbay, stepping aside as gurneys and crew members rushed by. He pretended he did not see blood on their uniforms.

He saw the blonde-haired boy sitting on the calmer side of the medbay before Tommy even looked up. Phil knew that something was instantly wrong before he even saw Tommy's tear-filled eyes—something other than being in a traumatic situation, his instincts screamed at him—and he ran over there, clutching the boy to his chest.

"I was so worried," he breathed out. "I thought we'd lost you." Wilbur made a noise of agreement, and Tubbo gave a small sob of relief.

"You should have," Tommy murmured, and Phil jolted in surprise at the hopelessness that lay there. He looked down, and he saw the sadness that lay in the cyan eyes, and he knew something was horribly wrong.

"Oh, fuck," Techno cursed, and Tubbo gave a small cry of pain, clapping a small hand over his mouth, and Phil turned around to see Sniff lying on the pallet over—except she wasn't *lying* like she would ever wake up—she wasn't, and the vitals that lay next to her bed were flatlining, and she was dead. There was a respiration mask over her mouth and a radiation blanket over the rest of her body, but as Phil watched, he could not see the telltale foggy of the mask as she breathed.

The Human girl with the Elytrian parents was dead, and Phil knew that Tommy had lost someone important to him—and he had *liked* Sni'yfyer'ich and her ability to care. He thought that maybe he would have invited her to be an engineer on the *L'manburg*; she was undoubtedly bright and would have been an excellent addition to the crew.

And now, he realized with dawning horror, she would never breathe again.

"She lied," Tommy sobbed into his chest, making his uniform wet—yet Phil couldn't find the will to care because he knew that Tommy's world had just turned around again. Tubbo was horrifyingly silent like he knew something that they didn't, but Phil didn't have time to deal with that as his—as someone who was like a *son* to him cried. "She told me she would come back, and she's fuckin'—she's fucking *dead*. I couldn't—couldn't save her."

"It's okay," he murmured. "It's okay, Tommy. Just breathe."

"I don't wanna," Tommy said, and Phil knew with a heart-wrenching lurch that things would only go south from here, and he met Wilbur's sad brown eyes over Tommy's head; the Phantom giving him a slight nod of understanding as he traced a hand down Tommy's back. "I—I can't."

"Yes, you can," he said. "You *can*, Tommy."

"She saved me," Tommy said numbly, his whole body shaking until it collapsed and Phil picked him up and set him down on his lap like he was a young child—and he realized, then, that as intelligent and brilliant and as good as Tommy was, that he *was* just a kid, and had already been through so much. "She—she saved the ship."

Phil blinked. "But Toast said that it was an Elytrian—"

"Sniff *was* an Elytrian," Tommy whispered, and Phil felt his heart break even more as he looked over at Sniff with a new gaze. She had—had been one of *his* people? "She...they cut off her wings, and so she came to Earth."

"She's flying, now," he tried to assure the boy in his arms, ignoring the icy dread that sliced through him, his wings ruffling in their protective circle against his youngest. "Among the clouds, y'know? She's happy. Maybe she's met your parents or something." To lose your wings as an Elytrian...it was any wonder the girl smiled and joked and laughed.

"They would have liked her, I think," Tommy muttered. "Phil, she's *dead*." A fresh wave of tears fell down his face. "She's dead, and she's not coming back."

"That's sort of how being dead works," Techno said monotonously, and Wilbur punched him. "Ow! What the fuck?"

"At least fucking *try* to have some empathy, you prick," the Phantom hissed, as Phil murmured sweet nothings to Tommy and tried to ignore the mass chaos of people and words and emergency surgeries around him.

"I..." Techno said, for once having no words.

"I'm never gonna see her again," Tommy said numbly. "I'm—I'm never gonna walk the Golden Gate Bridge with her again. Never gonna cheat off her notes in Interspecies Protocol—never gonna travel the stars with her." He drew a shuddering breath. "I—I failed. *Again*."

"Not 'again'," Tubbo said, speaking up. "It's okay, Tommy."

"I keep failing," Tommy said, shaking. "Over and over, and I can never save them." Phil frowned, confused, as Tubbo reached over and took his hand.

"It is not your fault," the Shulker declared.

"Everything is," Tommy said. As if it were final.

And that was that.

His friend was dead, and his world had shattered.

Tommy lay curled on a bed—it wasn't his, it wasn't—on the *L'manburg*, his knees nearly drawn to his chest, staring numbly at the grey-paneled walls that lined the room.

How long had it been since the destruction of the *U.S.S Midway*? How long since he had uttered those words to Phil—words he should have never said, feelings he should never have said out loud?

He couldn't bring himself to care.

Sometimes he heard people talking to him in the early morning when he should have been sleeping—but he couldn't sleep, not anymore, not when his dreams were full of people that he could not, and never had, saved.

Sniff was his friend, and she joined the ranks of Alyssa and Grian and Foolish—she joined people that he had failed; she became one of the many people that Tommy had, inevitably, failed.

There was an IV in his arm. He knew that only because he could feel it tugging at his skin when he pulled it out—inadvertently or deliberately, he didn't know—and then Niki or Lani or even Ranboo's hands as they fixed it for him with hushed phrases and words. He refused to eat because—because some part of him, *most* of him, did not want to live on in a world where he would kill his friends.

Sometimes there was someone next to him, a warm arm around his chest—a hand in his, occasionally—sometimes someone had a hand on his head, and they talked to him, but he did not respond.

"—and I know Elytrian and Standard and Blazeich and Merling, but I've never learned that language adequately, much as I tried," Wilbur was saying, once, in the middle of the night, his body warm next to Tommy's cold one, despite the insane amount of blankets piled over him. "I think it

has to do with vocal cords, because they're two small muscles with a moist covering within the larynx, 'cept I think that the Arachnids have different, or extra, vocal cords because they're *supposed* to open to allow air to flow from your upper airway into your trachea and lungs, but—"

Tommy tuned his ranting out, and returned to pondering the deaths of the children in Pogtopia. Perhaps, had he been better, he could have saved more—he could have saved the entirety of the Children's Rebellion, and not just two others and one, himself, that did not deserve to live.

He was sure the pillow below his head was permanently wet from the tears that consistently dripped down his face.

Tommy heard shouting a few times, when some officers came to try to force him to give a statement on the engine room and the Elytrian girl known as Sniff. He heard Phil screaming at them to leave him alone as Wilbur strummed softly on his guitar, trying to drown out the sounds of the yelling. Even Techno raised his voice a few times when they came with an official document, and they left him alone after a few—days? Hours? He didn't know.

He remembered standing on the railing of the Golden Gate Bridge with his arms outstretched and Sniff screaming at him maniacally to get down or else he'd fall. He'd laugh and jump a few times, always landing neatly on the bar as the winds changed direction to compensate for his center of balance. Sniff would always have an appalled look on her face, and she'd always scream at him that one day he would fall.

He'd never fallen.

Now, he felt like he had fallen twenty times the distance and hadn't been able to catch himself. As if he'd smashed upon rocks below, as if he'd sunk and begin to inhale the water.

He remembered helping her in Advanced Subspace Geometry, and then the teacher would call on him, and he'd do the problem without even looking up from his datapad. He'd see Sniff's silent laughter as the students, and their teacher looked at him, baffled. And he'd look away and remember that he'd taken this class when he was fifteen in a place called Pogtopia.

Well, at least one good thing had come of that wretched place.

He remembered copying her notes in Interspecies Protocol because he'd never been particularly good at remembering how to not insult other species'.

He remembered playing the piano for her once. Just once, and one of the first times he'd touched the piano since the *H.M.S Fran*. He cried the whole time and missed a few keys, but Sniff had smiled and said it was pretty anyway. Then she'd said she knew how to play the violin, and he'd been surprised—because that was his second instrument, the one that he'd learned on Pogtopia after he couldn't handle playing the piano anymore.

He'd known her for less than a month, perhaps, but it had felt like forever. She had been the first person that he'd told about Pogtopia—Tubbo accidentally finding out didn't count.

When he next awoke, it was a little past midnight—and for once, he was alone. He rolled out of bed, checking the tear streaks on his face before stumbling into the hallway, drawing the IV out of his arm. His legs protested the whole way, but he—somehow—caught a transport to Terra and got off, the officer on duty giving him an odd look as he stood there—greasy hair, dull red-rimmed cyan eyes, and no shoes—but who was he to judge Tommy?

He didn't—perhaps he should have, in the end—and Tommy walked all the way to the Golden Gate Bridge from the landing pad, his hands tucked in his armpits, nearly falling like fourteen times on the way there. The wind blew in his hair as he stared at the sky and at the twinkling stars.

This was, perhaps, the most awake he'd been in a while. Tommy breathed out, the wind drying the wetness on his face.

"Sniff says hello," he whispered to the night sky, quoting a book that Techno had read him recently—something about Greek mythology or some shit. He barely remembered it, but that line had stuck out to him.

Tommy climbed up on the red metal railing, sitting down, legs kicking into space. He tilted his head, mesmerized by the waters below, illuminated by the pale moon.

"You can control the air as an Avian, right?" Sniff asked him as they walked along the Golden Gate Bridge one school evening. Well, she was walking along the path. Tommy was walking along the

bars. Sniff

"I suppose, in a simplistic term," he said with a wry grin. "Yeah."

"Does that mean you could, like, walk on air?" Sniff asked eagerly.

He paused, putting his arms out as he placed his feet upon the metal, and came to a halt, wavering slightly. Sniff rolled her eyes at him. "I...maybe," he said dubiously. "But that would take a lot of strength to press against the soles of my feet, and my center of balance would be off — "

"You should try it sometime," Sniff told him.

Tommy grinned and jokingly put his foot over the edge of the bridge, where the waters lay, sixty-seven meters down.

Sniff shrieked. "Not like that, you idiot!" she said, grabbing his arm and making him fall onto the concrete. "Do you have a death wish?! Do it over like — a foot drop, not the fucking Golden Gate Bridge!"

He'd laughed, then.

Tommy stood up on the railings shakily, putting his arms out as the wind tousled his golden hair and the wind assaulted his face. He was—high up. Very high up.

I wonder if I would die if I hit the bottom.

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, Tommy bit his lip and tried not to cry. By this point, he knew that something was very wrong with him. That maybe—maybe instead of fighting this internal battle, he should tell someone so they could help.

But—he couldn't do this anymore. He couldn't be the cause of so much *death*, and even though he knew why the Avians attacked the *U.S.S Midway*, he still suspected that it was him that the Arachnids had come for. That it was *his* fault that forty-seven people had died, one of them one of his best friends.

If he wasn't around anymore, then the Arachnids wouldn't kill any more people to get to him, right?

Tommy let out a breath as he wavered. He hadn't come here to—to do *this*—he'd come here to be in the spot that he talked to Sniff at—but now that the opportunity was here...

He wondered if he would take it. If he *wanted* to take it.

A hovercar screeched behind him—as much as one of the floaty things could—and Tommy looked over his shoulder to see Niki and Wilbur standing there, the car doors open.

"Tommy, get down from the ledge," Wilbur said in a low voice, his eyes flashing with fear.

"You won't die," he assured them, because—they didn't want to. That was sort of the point, wasn't it? "Don't worry." Perhaps his words didn't make sense. They didn't understand that he was trying to *save* them. He hadn't understood Sniff either.

Sniff had wanted to fly. *He* wanted to fly.

"Tommy," Wilbur said again—almost like he was soothing a scared cat. "Tommy, please." He took another step towards Tommy, putting his arms up. Niki watched them tentatively, her hands shaking and her eyes wide and terrified. "You don't have to do this."

"Don't you fucking understand?" he hissed. "It's *my* fault!" Tears pricked at his eyes again, and he closed them for a second, letting the water drip its familiar pathway down his face.

"This isn't your fault, Tommy!" Niki said. Wilbur put a hand on her shoulder, and she let out a breath. "That attack wasn't your fault!"

"Yes, it is!" he screamed. "They're looking for *me*, just like Chroma is!" He wasn't supposed to say that last name. It just...came out.

Wilbur paused, a measure of confusion entering his eyes. "We can—we can protect you," he said. "It doesn't have to be like...this."

"You think I give a shit about *myself*?" he snarled angrily. Wilbur didn't seem to fucking *understand*. "Everyone around me fucking dies!"

"The Vice-Admiral looked into it!" Niki said. "The Arachnids attacked the ship because they had an important prisoner on it! It's got nothing to do with you!"

He sneered at her. "Not just fucking *that*," he said. "There's more to this fucking world than that. I'm talking about Pogtopia." He regretted the words as soon as they spilled out.

"Tommy, you're not making sense," Wilbur said gently. "Come down from there. We can talk then."

"I don't..." he said, licking his lips. "It's my fault they're dead, Wil. It's my fault that thousands are gone."

"It can't be your fault," Wilbur said firmly. "Okay? Trust me, Tommy." He held out a hand, stepping closer. "Just—please come down. This isn't your fault."

"YOU DON'T FUCKING UNDERSTAND!" he screamed, lifting his arms up and doing a small twirl on the metal bar, one foot kicking out slightly. Niki shrieked slightly, but he didn't slip. He wouldn't slip unless he wanted to. "The children on the Red Planet—it's *my* fault they're fucking dead! *I* created that hand signal that caused the final streak of the genocide. *I* led Alyssa and Foolish and Grian into the Children's Rebellion, and I couldn't even fucking save them when they got executed!"

As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted them. As soon as the words hovered in the air, he understood why Toast had said to tell them sooner rather than later, otherwise, it would blow up in his face.

He was an Avian, and he wouldn't fall unless he wanted to.

Niki's jaw dropped, and she put a hand over her mouth, trying to hide her shock from Tommy. Wilbur tried harder to hide his surprise, but he couldn't—not something like this. Because while—yes, he was the son of Sam Innes and survivor of the *H.M.S Fran*, this secret had been buried under every barrier he had ever thrown up, every obstacle he had ever put out. He had given this secret once, and it had been taken once—from Sniff and Tubbo respectively, and he supposed it was out, now.

This was his legacy, and he would be damned if it would be forgotten, even if he was dead. Purpled didn't deserve to be forgotten. Ranboo didn't deserve to be forgotten either, even if the Enderian himself had misremembered the events.

"Tommy..." Wilbur whispered, trailing off.

They saw it. The truth in his eyes, the pain that he'd held for so long. They saw it, and they *knew* that he was honest with them—for once.

"I am the leader of the Children's Rebellion," he hissed, angry and spiteful at the universe for its fucking shitty ways of playing, *toying*, with him. "And it is *my* fault they died." He let out a shaky breath. "I won't—I can't be the cause of death anymore."

The finality of the end was as dreaded as it was desired, and Tommy longed for it—for a journey full of horrific memories to end with him.

He was facing them when he took that step backward, when he wanted to *fly* and—and die. When he realized that maybe the world was better without him, without him *there*—no more deaths because of him, no more pain.

He pushed the air under his feet—just because he fucking could— and for a good five seconds, he *did* float. He would be lying if he said he *flew*, but he did hang in space for a longer period than should have been possible.

Niki screamed and ran towards him, and Wilbur shouted as well, and it was fucking *painful* how much they pretended to care.

Perhaps they did, he thought wryly. But he cared for them more, and he would not let them die because of him. He would not run anymore—Chroma would tear through the world to find him. He knew that, *had* known that—*no more running*. Chroma couldn't find him if he was gone. Nobody could act as shields if he was well and truly dead.

And so Tommy let out a breath, the moon shining in his eyes as Wilbur grabbed for his arm, reaching over the edge of the railing with wild eyes and wind-torn words on his tongue—just a hairs' breath too late, and Tommy let himself fall, feeling the fingernails scrape his uniform.

It was almost peaceful, the wind roaring in his ears, as Tommy fell and fell and then—

And then he was mere meters from the water, and his fucking instincts kicked in, and he thought, *no, wait, I don't want to die*, and he stopped himself from breaking every bone in his body when he hit the surface.

And he realized he was a hypocrite, and he was confused, and he didn't know what he wanted. He didn't know whether to live or die because he was afraid of death, of everything beyond life, and he didn't want to live because he didn't want to bring death down upon his friends.

The water was cold as he hit it—it was cold and salty and stung Tommy's eyes.

He was crying underwater, and his lungs hurt so much, the moon flickering above the surface, but he didn't want to kick up, didn't want to do anything but sink and sink until he hit a better place where Sniff still lived, where he could have those nighttime talks with Grian about what was morally right and wrong, where he could see Alyssa paint her pictures one last time, where Foolish could build things, and Tommy could joke around with all of them. Where the grass sang a golden yellow and where the sun still set in the evening.

Where everything was right, and he had become a pilot for the *L'manburg*, and Ranboo hadn't forgotten him—there was a reason that he'd been avoiding the Enderian because Tubbo had said that things from his past raised up memories that Tommy thought were better left forgotten.

Ranboo didn't need to remember the details—the feeling of your stomach eating itself inside out as you starved—Ranboo didn't *need* that, and Tommy didn't want to remind him of the horrible things. He'd stayed away and avoided him except for a few necessary conversations, and perhaps he'd pretended to ignore the hurtful looks the albino Enderian threw him.

They would be okay without him. Purpled had thought him lost once, and he'd been fine the whole way without him. The world would move on without Tommy Innes.

And maybe he would see his family again.

Maybe they would fill that aching gap in his chest whenever he saw other students at Fleet school interacting with their parents. Maybe—maybe he would laugh with Sniff again and freak her out by balancing on railings that no other race could safely.

Tommy let himself drift into nothingness.

He could have sworn that something touched his wrist in the icy coolness of the San Francisco Bay before his vision turned black. Perhaps it was the bottom of the bay.

"Tommy," Sniff said reproachfully.

He blinked at her in the grey mist that they stood in, glancing around. "S-Sniff?"

"No, it's the other dead teenage girl you know," the Elytrian hissed, and Tommy smiled when he saw pale green wings curl around herself—they suited her, and they looked like they belonged. "Yeah, it's fucking me."

"I like your wings," he told her.

She shook her head. "That's not funny."

"I wasn't joking."

"That's not what I meant," she seethed. "Tommy, what are you doing here?"

He glanced around again at the grey mistiness that they stood in. It was like one of those infinity rooms he'd seen in VR. "I don't know," he admitted.

"You need to go back," she insisted.

"Um...aren't I dead?" he asked dubiously.

"No," Sniff said, shaking her head. "Only sort of."

"Am I hallucinating?"

"You could be," she said patiently.

"You know, I didn't know you could be sort of dead."

"Stop joking around," she snapped at him. "Seriously, Tommy. You shouldn't be here."

"I shouldn't have lived that long anyway," he said. "First Pogtopia, and then the Wasteland—actually, no, wait, first the *H.M.S Fran*, and then the Wasteland, and then Pogtopia, and then the Wasteland again, and *then*—"

"Some things were just never meant to be," she told him.

"Maybe this was," he responded, slightly unsettled. "Why does that phrase seem...off?"

She shrugged, her face not giving away anything. "Maybe you knew it in another life."

"I've lived other lives?"

"Who knows."

"*You* do," he pointed out. "You're dead."

"Yes, I suppose I do know."

"Can you tell me the meaning of life?" he asked her.

"I'm dead, not a God."

"But certainly, you know."

"Of course," she answered readily. "But you need to go back."

"I don't want to," he answered honestly.

"Tommy, you are going to save so many people," Sniff told him. "You could if you give yourself a chance."

"I've already killed far too many."

"Those were not your fault."

"Yes, they *were*."

Sniff held up a hand. "I'm not going to continue arguing with you because you won't change this easily. I wish I could have convinced you, but I did what I had to do."

"No regrets?" he asked hoarsely.

"Some regrets," she told him with a sad smile. "Maybe I regret not being able to be there for you anymore, but doing what I did...no, I do not regret that." She reached out a hand and put it on Tommy's shoulder. "Tommy, you were my best friend. I cared—I *care* about you so, so, much." He drew in a shaky breath. "And your family cares about you too."

"You've spoken to them?" he asked her.

Sniff only smiled, blue eyes twinkling. "*You* are only dead if you choose to be," she said. "*I* never got that choice. And that's fine because I am not you. And *you* need to go back."

"Will I remember this?" he asked her desperately.

"No," she told him solemnly. "Maybe a glimpse of feathers. But none of *this*."

"Then I don't want to go," Tommy said with finality. He could not lose her again—he wanted to remember *this*, to give her a real last chance at words.

She shrugged. "In the end, it's your choice," she said. "But go through that door—" Tommy turned to where her finger was pointing and saw a door standing there, outlined by a pale white. "—and you'll go back. Or stay for a while, and let yourself drift to whatever lies beyond. I can only tell you the choices."

"You literally *told* me to go back."

"As a friend, not as your guide," Sniff replied quickly. "Do you know what you're missing?" Tommy shrugged, and Sniff waved her hand. He turned as a screen made of sunlight and moondust appeared in front of them, the particles forming a screen not unlike a video screen. He frowned as he saw Ranboo clutching Tubbo to his chest, the shorter boy sobbing his heart out. The Enderian was crying too. "They care about you too, Tommy."

His heart was stuck in his throat as the screen changed, and he saw Phil raise the commlink to his other hand to answer it, Technoblade moving a chess piece from where they sat in their quarters, apparently playing the game. Tommy couldn't hear any of the words spoken, but Phil went deathly pale, and Techno froze, the piece in his hand clattering to the floor from where he'd been holding it above. "This is fucking blackmail." Sniff didn't respond.

The screen shifted once more, and Tommy saw Purpled sitting in the bathroom—in the same place where he'd once sat, screaming at the magenta-eyed Human. Tommy reached out a hand as he saw the tears leak down Purpled's face, as his mouth moved in whispers that Tommy couldn't read.

"What is this place?" he asked, turning to Sniff.

But she was gone, and there was nothing left but shifting sunlight and unending greyness. Tommy breathed out sharply, returning back to the screen—that had also dissolved.

She hadn't said goodbye.

She'd never said goodbye.

Tommy bit his lip as he glanced at the doorway, which wavered, uncertain. As he watched, it turned to smoke little by little.

Did he want to go back? *Did he?*

He wanted to go home. If this was a home, he wanted it.

He wanted to see his mom and dad, and aunt again. He wanted to see Alyssa and Foolish and Grian again.

Sniff had said he would never remember this moment should he choose to step through that doorway. And—and he *wanted* to remember. Remember her. Remember *this*.

One last fucking time.

That phrase—that phrase that she had said— *it was never meant to be* —hung in his head. She had said he would save people. She had said that he would do more, *be* more.

And if there was any chance—even a small one—and fixing everything, even if everyone said that it *wasn't his fault* (he knew it was)—then he would leap to take it.

He wondered if that viewing screen had been legit. Or if that was some messed up past or future that he would never actually remember that he saw. If he was hallucinating and actually dead, and this was all a dream, and they had faked giving him a second chance.

But that would be terrible, right?

Life is terrible, an inner voice hissed to him, and Tommy winced. ***Life is terrible, and then you die***.

But that's not true! He—was he arguing with himself? *There are beautiful things about it too! There are friends and laughter and hugs and things that I need to see!*

You've seen what you need to see! You are the cause of so much death and destruction! You don't deserve a second chance!

Sniff said it wasn't my fault!

Sniff lied to you! You know she would; she lied, and then she died!

She didn't, though...she said she would come back. That was her promise. Not to stay alive — I don't think she expected to. And — and, well, she did come back. At least I got to hold her; at least I didn't have to simply watch as her eyes faded, like Grian and Alyssa and Foolish.

You could have saved them if you tried.

Could I have?

Yes.

Fuck you.

Tommy closed his eyes and made his choice.

In another time, another place, a brown-haired man screamed his heart out as he watched his little brother fall, and a pink-haired woman closed her eyes and made her choice as well.

Chapter End Notes

Funny story - this was actually written about two months ago (as of right now, I am writing chapter 43 out), and long before the Passerine author talked about all the fics being in the

same universe. Funny coincidence right there, and I thought about deleting this because it isn't strictly science fiction, but that detail in there made me think of that—what if all fanfictions were connected but in different worlds? Or different time periods, different lives? That would be interesting.

Of course, this fic is strictly science fiction and will not stray from that—I just thought it was neat to incorporate that little bonus :)

red sky, brown grass

Chapter Notes

Yes, this is the separate prequel that was deleted and now made into a chapter.

Nothing ever goes away

until it teaches us

what we need to know.

- Peme Chodron

He remembers the fields of golden light and the flowers that grew near the shallows of the lakes and rivers under green-leafed canopies.

He remembers being retrieved from the spaceship explosion; he remembers *shaking* as he concludes that his family is dead and isn't coming back. He remembers shaking in his escape pod, tears rolling down his face, as he looks onto the empty void of space and *weeps*. He was ten, then.

He is twelve when he is rescued from the prison that his parents' enemies brought him to. Twelve, released by an older, Avian man with a perchance for speaking with a silver tongue and a promise for a new home. Twelve, when the Avian—*just like him, he thinks*—brings him through warp speed and past planets and to a burning golden one called *Pogtopia*. Burning, because the atmosphere is red, and when they land, and he beholds the scarlet sky, he thinks of the flames of the *H.M.S. Fran* as it crashed into the Arachnid warship—his family onboard.

The Avian tells him that this place is a home for lost children, and he brings Tommy to a set of buildings on a glowing field of wheat, and he shows him the place where Tommy will live, with all the other children—learning, until they grow up and go home.

He does not tell the Avian—his name is Chroma, like a hue—that he does not have a home, for he was born on the spaceship and lived there for ten years. He does not tell the man that there were things about his family that he is just figuring out—that Chroma likes the Arachnids, that his family *didn't*, and Tommy thinks of the whispered messages and hushed transmissions they sent when they thought he wasn't looking. He hears Chroma gnash his teeth in loathing and irritation at any mention of the *Galactic Rebellion*, and Tommy thinks that his family might not have been transporters like their I.D.s said they were.

There are three thousand, two hundred, and seventy-three children there, ages ten through nineteen. They are there to go to school, to learn about the planets and stars. The other kids promise him that it is fun, that they are learning *so much*.

They do not know about their families.

Tommy does not mention he saw his die.

He meets a boy named Purpled. Purpled has blonde hair and magenta eyes, and he is *angry*, oh, so angry. Tommy asks him why and Purpled says that he wants to go home.

Purpled is fourteen, just a single year older. Purpled has two brothers, and he says that Chroma says that they are dead, but Purpled knows they are not. He says that he wants to go *home* to Terra—which Purpled calls Earth. Tommy learns that Purpled is Human. Tommy discovers that Chroma and the multitudes of guards will not let Purpled home. Purpled seethes with an inner rage that shows in his magenta eyes, but there is also a sadness that lingers on his features whenever he thinks nobody is looking. Purpled longs for home.

Tommy meets his other roommate, an Enderian named Ranboo. Ranboo is an oddball—he has half white skin and half black skin, and he's partially albino because his mother used to take narcotics when she was pregnant. Tommy learns that Ranboo's family is dead as well—he's been here since he was five when Chroma rescued him. Ranboo has memory problems when he eats anything but food from his homeland. He cringes whenever a guard comes near, and Tommy later learns that the Arachnids think that Ranboo is a waste of space and deserves to be killed.

There are others. There is a girl named Alyssa—she is sixteen—and there is a boy named Foolish. That is not his actual name, but he says to call him how he is, and so Tommy calls him Foolish.

The name sticks and Tommy makes new friends. They are not as close as Purpled and Ranboo, but they are close. Close enough that he tells them stories of his family—his aunt and his dad—close enough that he teaches them how to fly a ship on the simulations when it's that type of class.

Chroma is not always there. He says that he is busy, but Tommy likes seeing him because Chroma will tell him of space battles and accomplishments. Chroma will never replace Sam, but Chroma is like a father to him—and he is always interested to hear of battles won and epic fights. Chroma is an Avian like him, and Tommy has never met another Avian besides his mother, who has been dead for ten years.

Tommy turns fourteen, and he goes to school and learns about biology and science on that golden field of wheat and swims in the lakes. He plays the violin, and he gets angry because he is not good at it at first—but Alyssa sits him down with her own violin and teaches him two hours a day for a month. He gets better, and then one day, he surpasses his Feline friend. She is not jealous and smiles at him as she goes back to drawing; she'd always been more interested in that than instruments. Tommy plays and plays and plays until his arms hurt and the strings snap, and he has to get his music teacher to restring it. The piano sits in the corner, used by other students, but Tommy does not touch it. It brings him too much fresh pain—if he does not look at anything that is a blatant reminder, then he does not have to remember.

Ranboo tells him that is a terrible strategy. Ranboo and Alyssa are the only ones who know he plays the violin.

Purpled turns fifteen, and Ranboo does too, and another boy arrives on Pogtopia—his name is Grian, he says, and he's seventeen with a red sweater, and apparently, his planet was hit by an atom-bomb, and everyone is dead. Tommy tells him that Chroma has rescued him, and he is fine now. Grian gives him a look that Tommy does not understand, and they walk to maths together.

Grian is not good at maths, but Grian is good at geometry, able to construct shapes in his head. Tommy has never been good at geometry because he loves *flying* and space and is never really interested in anything else. Purpled has expressed interest in ship diagnostics and Ranboo in medicine, and Tommy thinks they should pilot a ship together one day. Alyssa and Foolish join their little gang, and he says that Alyssa would be a great ambassador—she loves speech and debate, and Foolish a science officer. They profess their agreement in the matter, and Tommy grins.

They dance in the fields of golden wheat together and watch the stars—just the six of them, all teenagers, all young, all rescued by the one called Chroma, and learn new constellations.

Tommy asks Chroma whether he can fly a starship that he sees, and Chroma flies into a rage that he's never seen before, and Tommy is scared as Chroma seethes that Tommy wants to *leave* him after everything.

Tommy cries that night.

He just wanted to fly. He would never leave Chroma. Not after the line that connects them together because they are Avians and belong as one.

In the morning, Chroma takes him out of chemistry and apologizes, saying that he lost a space battle and was mad. Tommy thinks of the stinging spot on his face, and he smiles bright and forgives him—bright as that thing in his head that tells him to *trust* Chroma and that they are family.

Chroma leads him to a fighter, and Tommy learns to fly with Chroma's hands over his, just like his dad's with the simulations. Tommy does not leave the atmosphere, but he skims over the golden fields, and he laughs under the scarlet sky. He tells his friends what happened, and Grian has a frown on his face as Ranboo touches up the bruise on his face—but Purpled and Alyssa and Foolish are smiling, so Tommy ignores the red-sweatered boy, and he explains the swiftness that the fighter flew.

Grian has a frown on his face for a long time, and a week later, he takes Tommy to a corner when they're supposed to be taking samples from the moss on the west side of the trees. Tommy is fourteen. Tommy is confused as Grian asks him if he knows about manipulation, and then they get into an argument when Tommy insists that Chroma is *good*, and Grian points out that Chroma hit him.

Tommy freezes, and he knows, then, that Sam and Puffy would *never* hit him.

He cries, but he goes back to the fighter and flies the next day with Chroma. He does not believe Grian entirely, but he knows to be careful what he says.

Tommy feels terrible when he tells Chroma that he does not remember much about his parents, and Chroma flies into another rage.

Tommy leaves the room with a black eye, and he cries in his room. Purpled and Ranboo come over and comfort him.

Tommy wants to go home, but he does not have a home. Later that week, when the six of them are lying on the golden fields staring up at the dark scarlet sky, Purpled says that he can come live with his brothers. Tommy cries again.

Chroma will not let them leave. He brings new children in, but nobody leaves. He says soon but soon is not an answer. Tommy asks, and he returns with bruises.

Chroma is nothing like Sam.

Halfway through his fourteenth year, one of the guards brings in a virus from another planet. Halfway through his fourteenth year, Tommy sees the golden grass turn brown, and he watches as the food becomes scarce.

No ships leave the surface. Tommy watches as the stores in the warehouse decrease, and he is in the room as Chroma makes the decision to survive.

It is not the right decision, he thinks.

Instead of calling for help, Chroma decides that termination is in order and devises a list of half the kids that will survive and half that will die.

Ranboo is on the death list, as are Grian and Alyssa.

Tommy walks away white-faced and meets up with his friends under the sky.

This—this is genocide. This is murder. Chroma said it needed to be done, and he ruffled Tommy's hair playfully as he held the list that said he would *kill* half the children that Tommy has known for a year and a half.

They are children, and Chroma is too prideful to call for help.

The grass dries to brown, and they run out of Enderian fruit.

The Enderians are added to the death list, and four hours before Chroma is to call all the kids to the field and separate them into life-groups and death-groups, Tommy tells his friends to run.

They run into the forest, and Tommy watches them go. They have a packet of nuts and a bit of water—but nothing more, for now, the warehouses are empty, and there is nothing left.

He does not come to the celebration, and he sneaks into Chroma's apartments and sends a signal to anyone who is listening for help. They are in sector seventeen—the nearest help will take months to reach them, but it is better than nothing.

He hears the screams of the children.

And then he hears nothing at all.

There are half as many children in the cafeteria in the following days. Tommy is tight-faced and silent, and he prays that his five friends survive.

He is served a handful of nuts to last him the day, and he thinks of Ranboo and the lack of chorus fruit. Ranboo will start to forget. He cries.

When Chroma asks why he cries, he says that he misses his friends. Chroma tells him that it was for the greater good, so the ones worthy could live on.

The grass does not grow back and remains brown, crunching under his feet as he walks.

The scarlet sky, which Tommy used to love, now reminds him of blood. He sees the last of the food dwindling, and Chroma halves the kids once again.

Tommy is fourteen. He can do nothing. He can do nothing but watch the phasers fire and as children bleed onto the ground with empty stares and expressions of fear.

Children rebel, and Tommy watches as they are publically executed.

He runs. Two months after his friends left, he runs, and twenty kilometers away, he finds them in a cave. They have concocted a virus that only Humans can catch—Purpled is sick, deadly sick, and Ranboo cannot remember a thing, as they have lived off tree bugs and bark.

They are pale. He is pale. He is a twig, and he wants to go home. He is skinny, and his blue eyes are grey and dull, and there is an ache that remains in his stomach.

He is hungry.

Alyssa looks at him with pleading eyes as Purpled groans from an aching high fever, and Ranboo cradles his head in his hands and screams.

He decides right then and there that he will follow in his family's footsteps.

He sits in that cave, and he tells his five friends that this cannot go on. That he cannot let Chroma murder children until there is nothing left—that they are children, and they do not deserve to die.

He creates the Children's Rebellion. It is not called that, not at first, because he is not a child—but later, when he looks back, it is called that. It draws attention, and it is poetic—so he leaves the name as it is.

Alyssa, Foolish, Grian, and himself head out. There are only three hundred children left when they get back, and the grass is still brown.

He will dream of browning grass for the rest of his life. He will dream of this aching hunger in his chest, and he will hoard food, and he will look at Grian, whose wings are weak from disuse and is too weak to fly—forever grounded, even as an Elytrian. He will look at Alyssa with her Feline

features and her careful thoughts, and he will look at Foolish's eyes, which glow white and start to fade as *he* fades because the Phantom relies on an inner strength that is lost as they starve.

They steal. Tommy lets Alyssa write her messages on the walls' sides, and they start a rebellion amongst the remaining children. Foolish checks up on the ping that Tommy sent—but there is no response. Grian gathers food in his arms, but there is *nothing*, and Tommy aches for the sweet taste of apples in his mouth as he curls up in that cave and tries not to cry too loudly.

There is no laughter. There is no love. There is only survival, but Tommy will make sure the members of the Children's Rebellion endure. They burn things to draw attention. They riot on the streets.

Slowly, the other children dwindle.

Chroma announces that to get food, you must cheer at the executions. Tommy refuses at first, but Purpled is still sick and feverish—and so he goes to them, and he claps when his class members die. He flinches at the draw of a phaser, and he sees the hollow looks in the eyes of *teenagers*, some of whom do not fight as they are sent to die.

The bodies become too many to count, and then Alyssa is captured, and Grian and Foolish as well.

He stands there in the crowd—fifty of them left, with Ranboo and Purpled in the caves, and he sees Alyssa with the gun to her head, and her chin held high. Grian's wings are shackled to the ground, and Foolish sheds tears of regret and resilience.

Tommy does not have a gun. He has other people to protect. If he dies here, then Ranboo and Purpled fall. If he dies here, then there is nobody left for his other friends.

Alyssa catches his eye as the gun is put to her head. The crowd is silent, but there are no tears left to fall upon the dead and frozen ground of the famine. The children of Pogtopia look on with dark eyes—as their peers are murdered in front of them, and they can do *nothing* because they are children and they have no power, no weapons, no influence.

Tommy looks at Alyssa in her torn and dirty outfit, her telltale paint cans missing from her pocket. She is thin and gangly and far too pale—he can see the bones of her jaw and her collarbones poke

too far out.

This—this is a famine.

This is murder.

This is a genocide, and Tommy will be damned if this is not remembered for the rest of his life.

He moves to step forward, but Grian shakes his head at him, and someone—he does not know who, and he never learns—hauls him back as he cries, silent tears pouring down his face.

Alyssa raises her right hand and raises three fingers—her pointer, thumb, and middle finger.

The sign of the Children's Rebellion.

The thumb and the pointer because it is the universal sign for *loser*—they *are* children, after all, and he'd found it funny. The middle finger because it meant *fuck you*, and combined with the pointer finger, it meant peace.

Peace, fuck you, and loser.

Ironic, as he is a child and immature and makes terrible decisions—and this is his, and his made, and he basks in its beauty that only the six of them truly understand.

But the hand sign is spraypainted in bright orange and pink all over the buildings in Alyssa's neat work, so they recognize it. Grian and Foolish follow her in the motion, resilience, and rebellion flashing in their eyes—an Elytrian and a Phantom and a Feline.

An Avian stands in the crowd, tears pouring down his thin face, thinking desperately of the Enderian in the cave, of the Terran who lies sick and dying, and he cannot move.

Alyssa smiles at him, cold and sad and full of anger.

And then Chroma calls the order, and she falls. Tommy's scream is only within him, but he is rooted to the spot as he is forced to watch as the phasers fire and his friends *die*. He is forced to watch with someone's arm around his stomach so he does not rush off and do something—well, foolish. A sob rises in his chest as Grian's wings go limp, his eyes staring into nothingness, as Foolish's green orbs close one last time, their hands still raised in rebellion.

Chroma waits for the children to cheer, to clap and say that this—that *this* is some form of righteous justice, but they do not.

One by one, they raise their fingers to form the signs, and Tommy's hands shake as he does so, wetness dripping down his face as he glares at the guards.

"Kill them all," Chroma growls, and if his eyes glance over Tommy, he does not know. He does not know because something in him shatters and hurts but separates him from his *feelings*, and he realizes that he hates Chroma and he wants the other Avian to die.

Tommy turns and runs. People scream as phasers are fired, and children fall, but he can do *nothing* as he knocks over a guard and grabs a small pack of food they would have handed out—and he sprints into the forest without looking back at the smoking place that used to be his home.

The brown grass crunches under his feet as he returns to the cave, and there is nothing there but Ranboo's mumbling and Purpled's whimpering as he forces food down their throats and then has to explain to a half-awake magenta-eyed boy that the other members of the Children's Rebellion were executed.

He sits in the cave, and he sobs.

Three days pass.

The mass graves grow, though he only learns later. The mass graves grow and grow, and children and lain to rest—Alyssa and Foolish and Grian are in one of the graves, piled like they are *nothing*, in a famine that could have been prevented had Chroma bent and called for help.

Later, they would call it the Red Planet's Genocide. They would talk of the Children's Rebellion and what it did; they would look over the camera footage and see the fire in Alyssa's eyes as she did one last act of rebellion. They would pour over the pictures and words scrawled upon the walls, and it would talk about the six members of the Children's Rebellion—a Phantom, a Terran, an Elytrian, a Feline, an Enderian, and an Avian.

Later, Tommy would find out that there were three survivors of the Red Planet's Genocide.

The Galactic Rebellion ships come just four days after the city was decimated; the final food supplies are gone. Guards have killed each other, and Chroma sat in his office and waited for it to end.

He sees them through the trees, and he forces his friends to stand up and walk—even as he keens with hunger and his hands shake with every step they take.

Tommy pushes Purpled and Ranboo towards the ships as they land, as they move towards the only place that had once carried life on the surface, and he tells them to go.

And then he goes for revenge as Chroma flees the planet's surface. Purpled fights and pleads, but he forces him into Pogtopia—because Tommy is not healthy, but he is not recovering from a fever like the magenta-haired boy, and he is the leader of the Children's Rebellion, and he must get revenge for the deaths of the other children because nobody else will,

He tells Purpled his goal, and Purpled tells him that it is pointless, that he will *die*, but he must.

He must because nobody else can, and Tommy doesn't have a family to return to, not like Purpled, and he is empty and broken, and he takes the last handful of nuts and swallows them, choking on the bitterness.

He is hungry, but he is always hungry, and he picks up a fallen phaser and goes to find Chroma.

Purpled screams his name until it fades into the distance—until the *L'manburg's* crew members find him and Ranboo shivering in the corner of an empty city full of bodies, blood, and symbols. He

makes a promise as he leaves, and it is one that he is not sure if he keeps. He makes a promise to *live*.

They are only two, of three thousand, two hundred, and seventy-three children. They are two, and everyone else is dead. The planet is abandoned.

Philza is a new captain at the time, but he was the closest to the sector when the call came through, and he wishes that he had come *faster*. He watches Ponk and Punz hurtle towards their little brother as he screams for someone who no longer exists, as he watches the footage and aches over the children who were lost, who were dead—as they stood in the town square of the place called *Pogtopia* with tears streaming down their face and were executed.

He feels sick as he watches the kids around them clap. Their eyes are tired, and they do not linger as food is handed out. They walk away, and the bodies are dragged to mass graves that line the town—too lazy to go any further.

The numbers dwindle until there is nothing.

He looks the other way as his first officer, Techno, kills half of the remaining guards in a rage that he should really fill out paperwork for—but won't, and doesn't. He looks the other way as his Chief Medical Officer, Niki Nihachu, throws up and sobs when they find the mass graves. He looks the other way when his Chief Communications Officer breaks into encrypted files on that horrible Red Planet and learns of the Avian called Chroma and his plans. It is illegal, it is against the code of the Galactic Rebellion—but why should the Galactic Rebellion care *now*, when they hadn't in the first place?

The crew only finds two survivors, of three thousand, two hundred, and seventy-three. They see the math sheets and datapads full of information and schooling and names, and they realize how many are lost. How many starved, how many shivered and died from lack of food, and how many were executed.

There is an interesting case—the final stand of the children who once populated the planet. Three teenagers stand with guns to their heads, and the girl raises three fingers with fire in her eyes until the phaser is fired and she falls. Her friends do the same, and a boy in the crowd has to be held back so he cannot leap out to save them and die. Philza aches for the boy, but the unnamed stranger that held him back was right.

He cannot bring himself to look over Chroma's notes, but he is glad the man is dead.

This is his second mission from the Galactic Rebellion, but it remains in his head for the rest of his life.

They report and leave the planet as fast as they can—more ships will arrive to check, to bring historians to learn of the mass genocide that happened here—to *children*, to kids who did not deserve an end like this. He sees Ponk's little brother's haunted eyes in the medbay, and he learns that Ranboo has had an allergic reaction to Terran food. Ranboo cannot remember a thing, and Purpled sobs over his lost friends and hoards food and throws up.

Philza sits in his office with his head in his hands and learns that the world is not a kind place. He stares at the stack of papers—papers that crew members had shakingly filled out with tears on their faces; papers of descriptions and so many of them are missing children that were found—too late, *too late*, by his crew. He watches as the most brilliant and youngest of his crew—the kid's name is Tubbo, and he is intelligent and bright and has a bounding future—learns of what his life could have been. Tubbo is second in command to the Chief Operations Officer at only fourteen, and Philza knows that he will be the first in command within five years.

He cannot imagine having found Tubbo here, one of the bodies in the mass rotting graves. He cannot imagine starving like this to the extent that Purpled refuses to explain.

He learns about the Children's Rebellion and watches as Purpled draws the insignia—six golden stars connected by six bloody lines.

Purpled does not tell the story, and Ranboo will never remember it, so Philza lets it fall. Ponk and Punz refuse to let their little brother out of his sight, and so Purpled, with shaky hands, follows with a datapad in his grip—always a bit of food poking out of his pocket.

Philza cannot bring himself to tell him that they will never run out of food on the ship. He cannot bring himself to force Purpled to explain what truly happened, first hand—how he survived the famine and genocide when he had *seen* Chroma's first death list and saw Ranboo's name upon it.

And so they will never know. Purpled does not know it—he had the bad case of the flu for over half of it—and Ranboo will never remember.

The banner is created, and the planets of the Galactic Rebellion mass produce it in remembrance of the three thousand, two hundred, and seventy-one children that died.

Purpled says that there is another, but they never find another boy on the surface's planet. He sees the hope dwindle as the months go on, reports upon reports of the Red Planet and the mass murder that occurred upon it. The guards they captured take pills of cyanide without saying anything, and Techno flies into a horrifying rage at the lack of revenge, of *justice*, that will never be served—because all those in power are dead. Philza reports to the Admiral that they will be taking all their missions against the Arachnids when they find Chroma's reports working with the Arachnids. Everyone on the ship agrees, and Purpled smiles *just* a bit wider.

Six stars. Six members.

Three will never tell their tale.

One will never remember, memories lost to amnesia from an immune disease never truly solved.

One only commemorates half of it, sick from an illness that only he got.

As for the last—he sits pretending that they were only dreams. The last was there through all of it; the last remembers it down to the smallest detail, the very air of Pogtopia.

But he is not here.

And he doesn't want to be.

And he closes his eyes, and he remembers where he truly is— *what* he is, and *who* he is.

His name was Tommy Innes, and he was done playing other people's games.

Oops, you made me drop my croissant—I mean, soup.

Chapter Notes

special thanks to [@korokapot on instagram](#) they pointed out that fanfic authors tend to get hurt.

Well, the co-owner of this fanfic got hit by a car and severed a ligament in her left ankle, and so now she has to relearn how to balance/walk properly with her physical therapist.

Sorry for being a day late!

Oh, also a good friend [rt_nique](#) created a beautiful rendition of the execution scene in Chapter 21 [here](#)

Blaming others is an easy way

to hide your mistakes.

- Nidhi Singh

Tommy awoke with a thought on his tongue—just a faint remembrance, like the grasping of a dream he will never remember. It slid from his mind like water on a mirror, and he lost it, the only thing remaining a flash of pale green feathers. He smiled in afterthought—it was a peaceful dream, and he wished he could go back to it. He couldn't remember it, but he was sure it had been great.

And then the events of what had happened before registered, and Tommy lost the sweet smile on his face.

Ah.

Sniff was dead, and he had attempted—sort of?—suicide.

Was it suicide if he saved himself?

Wait, who saved him from drowning?

Did that count as a double suicide attempt because he'd stopped himself from falling and then decided to asphyxiate at the bottom of the San Francisco Bay?

He was in a familiar place. The medbay. He almost laughed at the irony behind the situation. He was sure that he'd been here more times than he'd actually slept in his own *room* on the *L'manburg*—of course, that was an exaggeration, but he had been here way too many times for it to be actually healthy.

Actually, wait, he *wasn't* healthy.

And the walls definitely *weren't* soundproof because he could hear Phil and Wilbur arguing. Tommy blinked to dispel his drowsiness as he tilted his head, attempting to listen closely to their conversation.

"—didn't know it was this bad," Wilbur was saying, a note of desperation in his voice. Tommy could almost imagine him tearing at his hair. "Watching that—*seeing* that, Phil, was one of the scariest moments of my life." There was a shaky sob, and Tommy realized Wilbur was crying. "I'd—I'd already thought I'd lost him once, and then he does that..."

Tommy frowned as Wilbur broke off into sobs that were soon muffled, presumably being drawn into a hug by Phil. There was something in him saying that he regretted doing what he'd done—yet, given a chance, would he do it again?

He didn't know, and that scared him. Uncomprehended plans were sometimes scarier than acknowledged ones because they led to in-the-moment decisions and promises that could not—and would not—be kept.

"It's okay, mate," Phil said. "It's okay. He's okay."

"I don't *know* !" Wilbur wailed. "I—I turned around for five minutes, and he's gone! And then I run to Niki, and she fucking tracked him to the Golden Gate Bridge, of all places, and we get there, and he's fucking standing there looking all sad and shit and then he *falls*, and I couldn't catch him, Phil!"

"Niki got him," Phil reminded Wilbur soothingly.

"Yes, but she *shouldn't* have," Wilbur said, and Tommy frowned. Did Wilbur not care for him? "He should have died when he hit the water, Phil." Oh. "But he didn't break a bone—only minor hypothermia, except he was *drowning* for some ungodly reason! I don't fucking understand!"

"The only way you'll understand is if you ask him."

Wilbur's voice was so quiet when he next spoke that Tommy had to concentrate sharply to hear him. "I don't know what to do, Phil. I'm afraid that if I turn around or accidentally let him near something sharp, he'll be dead when I could have prevented it."

There's a small pause in the conversation.

"You know he's the kid that rescued me, Phil?" Wilbur asked softly, and Tommy's breath hitched. "I—I *recognize* him now, I *see* it, Phil. He had darker hair, but I'll be damned if that's not fucking *him*. His eyes are so much greyer, Phil, and I can't...I can't connect them, because that kid was happy-go-lucky and I should have forced him to come with me because he ended up in *Pogtopia*, for heaven's sake...he told me, and of course I believed him, but I couldn't connect the dots until..."

It's not your fault, Tommy wanted to say. *Not if I chose that.*

But he didn't say anything. He drifted off to sleep, and when he next awoke, the lights were brighter, and magenta-eyes were boring into his with an unreadable look.

"See, I *told* you the scans showed that he awoke fourteen hours ago," a voice said, and something in Tommy's brain screamed *Ranboo*, and he connected the dots, wincing lightly. He reached up a hand, wrinkling a nose at the clamp at the edge of his finger and the needle in his arm, and scrubbed at his eyes.

Purpled stared at him. He stared back.

"Look," Drista said loudly, and Tommy flinched as he looked over at the blonde-haired girl that was lounging on another cot, Lani pretending to scroll through a datapad—as if she wasn't looking up at him through her lashes, worry portrayed heavily on her face. "I'm *sure* whichever one of you blinks first is the weaker man." Purpled snorted loudly. "But unless we want the *adults* coming in to have 'serious talks'—" At this, Drista raised her hands and made two quotation marks, rolling her eyes. "Then let's actually do what we came here for."

"What's that?" he asked warily, not able to speak as loud as he liked. His throat hurt, oddly enough.

Purpled waved his hand, directing his attention back to him. "Eating." He shoved a bowl in Tommy's lap, blinking at him.

"R-right," he said, stuttering slightly and staring down at the warm bowl on his lap. It was brown, with bits of vegetables poking out—they'd fortunately remembered that his body could not, in fact, process meat—and perhaps some noodles. "Soup has spaghetti?"

"Yeah, haven't you had chicken noodle soup?" Purpled drawled at him. Out of the corner of his eyes, Tommy saw Ranboo leaning against the wall, a silent shorter boy next to him, staring on with red-rimmed eyes.

"No," he deadpanned. "I can't eat meat."

Purpled was silent, considering. "Oh. Right."

"If you're wondering," Drista said. "The soup won't blink back. You don't have to stare at it." He flipped her off without looking at her. "The soup always wins."

"I fucking bet it does," he muttered, quietly enough, so nobody heard him. "Why the hell are you guys here anyway?"

"What does that mean?" Purpled asked, crossing his arms. "Why do you *think* we're here, smartass?"

"That's not what I meant," he said carefully, pausing to use the metallic spoon to spoon the broth into his mouth. Okay, fine, it was pretty good—and he'd never been one to turn down food. "Like—I expected Niki or some other wavering old person." Ranboo choked in the background. "Not like—you know. The rest of the teenagers aboard the ship."

"I thought it was best that the adults take a break from hovering over you," Purpled said.

"You have that power?" he asked.

"Nope," Purpled said. "Not ship-wise, anyway. I just played the *well you know that's my friend who's actually the leader of the Children's Rebellion — oh, Wilbur, you knew that, because he told you and then jumped off a bridge! — and so actually I think I know more about him than you so get the fuck out before I do something you'll regret* card." Tommy's jaw dropped, and the four other occupants in the room winced. "It worked out pretty well. They haven't been back in about thirty minutes, and Clementine tells me there aren't any pesky ghosts hanging out in the walls."

"I...didn't jump off a bridge," he said carefully.

"Yeah, okay," Purpled said. "Sure as fucking hell *looks* like you did."

"It was more of an...estimated fall," he argued. "I saved myself before I hit the water."

"No, you didn't," Purpled whispered. "You didn't do it because you wanted to; you did it because your instincts screamed at you to. Niki still had to fish you from the waters."

"This is not a conversation I want to have right now," he said thoughtfully.

"Oh, when are we going to have it, then?" the magenta-eyed Human snarled at him. "When you next decide that the best course of action is fucking *killing yourself*?"

"Perhaps I made a flawed action," he said weakly, his stomach hurting. He really, really did not want to talk about this. "I didn't think it was this bad."

"I DID!" Purpled screamed at him, and Tommy jerked back, the bowl of stew sliding off his lap and smashing onto the floor. "I *knew* it was awful because the same damned thing happened to *me*, Tommy Innes! I knew your mindset, and I tried to help you!"

"You sent me into a fucking panic attack!" he shouted back.

"I NEVER SAID THAT ANYTHING I DID WAS CONSCIENTIOUSLY RIGHT!"

"I NEVER SAID I WANTED YOUR HELP!" he screeched.

Purpled laughed. "Well then fucking *grow up*," he snarled. "The world ain't about you. There are other people here too."

"I know," he said evenly. "It'll go on whether I'm here or not. So why are you trying to stop me from leaving?"

Purpled stopped, blinking at him. The room was deathly silent. "That's not what I meant," he said carefully.

"That's what I hypothesized it to mean," he said.

"Then you'd be wrong."

"I'm never wrong."

"No," Purpled said. "You're *mostly* right. In this case, you'd be wrong. It's not—"

"It's not *what*?" he snarled, the starting of Purpled's sentence making him flinch violently. "Not my time to die?"

"Where in fucking hell did you get that from?" Purpled asked him, startled.

"Chroma," he said. "*It's not your time to die, Tommy,*" he would say, and then he would send another batch of children off to get executed while I did nothing but watch." Tommy shrugged. "I suppose it never is, is it?"

"I would never say that," Purpled said, his magenta eyes flashing. "I am *nothing* like Chroma."

Tommy sighed. "I know," he said softly. "I'm sorry for comparing you two."

"I am nothing like Chroma," Purpled repeated. "None of us—" he glanced at Ranboo, who stared at him unblinkingly with his Christmas-light eyes. "—are anything like Chroma. As many mistakes as I make, and as many as you make, we are *nothing* like him. You will never become him. *I* will never become him. Ranboo will never become him. He is a murderer." Tommy opened his mouth and then snapped it shut when Purpled glared at him. "You know best of all of us that Chroma does not regret what he did. Tommy, he killed *three thousand* children. Perhaps the blood does not lie on his hands physically, but it was his orders that got them executed, and his poor leadership skills and cowardice that made everyone starve." Purpled let out a small breath. "I have had months and months to sit and figure this out. I *know* you're struggling to believe that you are not at fault, but if you blame yourself—then you blame me too."

"You were sick."

"We were all starving," Ranboo spoke up suddenly, and Tommy turned to face him. Lani looked slightly squeamish, though she'd disregarded all attempts to look like she was on her datapad. Drista looked slightly horrified and intrigued at the same time—Tommy didn't particularly blame her, as this was a conversation that brought details up—details that had never before been spoken in the presence of others. "Is that some form of being sick?"

"Aren't you a doctor?" Tubbo asked him, speaking the first words since Tommy had woken up.

Ranboo flushed. "I'm not a dictionary. We have datapads for a reason."

"Starvation is a severe deficiency in caloric energy intake," Lani rattled off. "There are three main stages." She held up a finger. "One. The body breaks down fat and protein if meals are skipped. Energy sources like fatty acids are used for muscles." Lani put up a second finger. "Two. This stage lasts weeks at a time. The body will mainly use stored fat for energy. This is terrible for losing weight, though. The body will begin to use ketones as energy. Ketones are energy your liver makes, in simple terms." She held up a third finger. "By stage three, your body will no longer have any stored fat. It will start to break down muscles to use as energy, as muscles are full of protein—and also break down very easily. When we run out of protein, our cells start to function improperly. This is true for every species except Phantoms—and Blazeborn," she added, almost as an afterthought. "As both those two species can use proteins—" Drista elbowed her, and she cut herself off. "Um. Well. Anyway, continuing with the actual topic, the cause of death from starvation is usually due to infections or the result of tissue breakdown after phase three because the body cannot gain enough energy to fight off bacteria and viruses. Sort of how the immune system works, I guess."

"You just—that just didn't answer my question," Ranboo said. "At all. Like, *at all*."

"It's not a *sickness*," Lani said carefully. "It does things sort of similar to viruses in the sense it makes your immune system weaker—though, with a sickness, your immune system is already compromised." She shrugged. "There's an actual medical professional here. Which is not me. You're actually higher ranking than I am, Ranboo."

"I have memory problems."

"That's what you said when you forgot my birthday," Tubbo snorted.

Purpled was silent for a moment. "You know," he said carefully. "It—it was Alyssa's birthday earlier this week." He frowned. "I don't remember the date."

"Oh," Tommy said. "I forgot."

"Well, she also told you it was in July, so you wouldn't scramble for a present," Purpled said, rolling his eyes.

"Wouldn't you find out when her birthday was when you celebrated it?" Lani asked cautiously as if testing the ground of questions.

"No," Purpled said quickly. "We didn't celebrate birthdays. I mean, officially. The school told us that it made people narcissistic." He snorted. "Of course, that didn't deter friend groups from celebrating birthdays. Alyssa just...didn't like them, I think."

"Excuse me, *what?*" Drista said. "Celebrating a birthday makes you *narcissistic?*"

Tommy laughed shortly. "Ha, yeah. Because it makes the day be all about you or some bullshit like that." He waved a hand. "I still got them gifts. Even Alyssa, on July thirty-second."

"You got her a present," Tubbo deadpanned. "On *July thirty-second.*"

"That's when she said her birthday was."

"Big Man, there ain't no July thirty-second."

"That's what *I* said," he replied. Purpled looked vaguely amused. "So I just gave her a present on August first and called it July thirty-second. Then she integrated leap year from Terra—cause of the shitty solar system—why the fuck couldn't it just rotate three-hundred and sixty-five days, not three hundred and sixty-five *point* two-five?—and so the next year it was July thirty-third."

"Which was sort of stupid since the Red Planet only has eight months," Purpled pointed out. "They tried to integrate a whole new monthly system for us, but most kids refused 'cause they're brought up on Terran systems. So the seasons shifted every year—like, we had autumn in February a couple of times, and then summer and winter in February the following years—it was sort of funny. The teachers eventually just called it by the seasons, in the end."

"Alyssa called it Fall," Tommy said.

"Yeah, 'cause the leaves *fall*," Ranboo said. "Makes sense to me."

He blinked at the Enderian. "Yeah, but that's why you're *you*, and I'm me."

"Alyssa seems like a funny person," Lani said, her lips twitching into a half-smile.

"She was," Tommy and Purpled said in unison. Ranboo dipped his head, still looking uneasy. At that moment, right there, Tommy felt terrible that the Enderian didn't remember anything. That—well, sure, he didn't have the PTSD, the horrid nightmares—but he didn't have the good times either. The laughter; the conversations under the stars—the pranking. Ranboo had none of the bad things.

He had none of the good ones either. And—well, Tommy supposed that only Ranboo could determine if that were a good or a bad thing.

"Hey, Tommy," Purpled said, gesturing at the soup on the floor. "Are you going to clean that up?"

"Nah," he said. "My legs hurt."

"I fucking wonder why," Tubbo muttered loudly.

"Besides," he continued, ignoring the brown-haired Shulker. "Aren't *you* the quartermaster?"

"Nah, I was—"

"You were reinstated," Ranboo put in helpfully. "Y'know, just like Tubbo...and Lani...and Drista?"

"—attempting to lie," Purpled grumbled. "You ruin the fun."

"You're attempting to step out of your duties," Ranboo said diplomatically.

"What are you, my *mother*?" Purpled snorted, shaking his head. "I'm doing the best I can do."

"Now that's not true," Tommy interjected. "Otherwise, you'd be doing paperwork right now." Purpled flipped him off, but Tommy smiled because he knew that while not many people might like filling out reports and correcting the ones that Techno and Phil sent through him to Command—that it was a way of getting information. And Purpled *hated* having no information. In the position that he was in, he got to chill out and have all the information that he needed. It was, like Tommy's love for freedom and flight, a sense of security that was close to the heart. Purpled had always wanted information when they'd played games as children—whereabouts of enemies, types of weaponry—and he knew that the Human had felt lost in that cave with just Tommy to rely on—and Tommy wasn't very reliable when it came to information.

"Okay, maybe I'm just here so that the Adults™ don't come barging through the door and interrogate you," Purpled said with a slight shrug, bending down and picking up the ceramic shards carefully and depositing them in one of the random trays on the bedside table. Personally, Tommy was surprised it hadn't been a medical-grade standard bowl. "And—you know. The enforcers."

"Oh," he said. "That's—wonderful."

"Yeah," Purpled said. "And uh—Sniff." Tommy bit his lip until he tasted iron, stiffening slightly. "Um...her parents are arranging her funeral. It's in two weeks. They want to meet you over video call as...soon as possible."

"Yeah, you can just fucking tell them I'm asleep," he muttered.

"Tommy—"

"I'm not going to *blame* them for Sniff's death," he said, gritting his teeth. "That's entirely *my* fault." Just about everyone in the room looked ready to argue with him, but he cut through their words with a glare. "However, I'm just saying, had they stopped looking at her as an injured person, maybe she would still be on Elytra."

"Right..." Tubbo breathed out. "Because she's an Elytrian." Lani's head whipped around to stare at her brother, eyes wide. Apparently, she hadn't gotten the memo.

"Yeah," Tommy sighed as Purpled dumped the last of the shards into the tray, putting a slightly bleeding finger in his mouth and waving Lani off until the Shulker whipped out a box of superhero

bandaids and threw them at his head.

Purpled swore violently at her as he picked up the box, picking through them until he drew out an Iron Man one and wrapped it around his thumb. "What?" he said defensively. "He's pretty cool."

"I never watched Iron Man," Tommy said dryly.

"What-t-t-t," Drista said disbelievingly, drawing out the final letter. "You totally should! It's like, a classic! Especially the Avengers—man, that franchise is so good."

"Yeah?" he asked. "Question, are there any executions? Any child deaths? Anything that'll send me into a panic attack?"

"No," Purpled said.

"Yes," Ranboo said at the same time.

Everyone in the room turned and glared at Purpled, who cleared his throat. "I—I mean, yes." He coughed. "But you should still watch it."

"Thanks, Purpled," Tommy commented sarcastically.

"No problem, man."

"We switch topics really quickly," Tubbo commented loudly. "Movies—PTSD—yelling at each other—jobs—um, Chroma..." he trailed off awkwardly.

"You aren't going to get in trouble for saying his name," Purpled said. "It's not like, a slur or anything. We're not fucking reclaiming it. He's just a bitch. Also, it ain't gonna send Tommy into a panic attack."

"It's sorta awkward to imagine that Tommy was there as well," Drista said, blunt as usual. Tommy raised an eyebrow at her, frowning. "Oh, stop giving me that look. I meant that—well, all the articles and projects I've done on Pogtopia—"

"You've done *projects*?" Ranboo said, his voice slightly shrill.

"Yeah, historical genocides," Drista said. "I'm pretty sure we're supposed to focus on it in Survival Strategies this week too."

"Kill me now," he groaned and then sat up straighter. "That was an expression. Don't take that seriously."

"*Anyway*," Drista continued, as Lani looked slightly scandalized. "It always mentions you two, you know, and then the deceased members of the Children's Rebellion as well—but most of the stuff is articles and lists and what people *think* happened based on camera footage, because ya'll are minors and don't actually talk to the press." She tilted her head. "Funny that there's a third now."

"I'm the leader," he told her.

"Yeah, I'm aware," she said dryly. "Hey, didn't you create the hand sign?"

He held it up for her—his middle finger, pointer finger, and his thumb. "Yeah."

"What's it mean?" she asked excitedly, and both Purpled and Ranboo groaned. "Historians have all these crazy theories, but those two idiots refuse to tell us why and how it was created by a—what, fifteen-year-old?"

"Basically," he shrugged. "Originally, it was just gonna be the middle finger. But I was smart, and I thought that people wouldn't include that in their projects." He flipped Purpled off. "You know, like the universal *fuck you* hand sign? Yeah. So that's why the middle finger is included. I added the thumb because who doesn't flip people off with their thumb outstretched? But then it sort of hurt my hand to do so I put the pointer finger up—" he demonstrated. "—and sort of realized that the middle finger plus the pointer finger equaled the peace sign, which I *suppose is* ostentatious, but whatever. And then the pointer finger plus the thumb equals loser—so yeah. There you go. Sign of the Children's Rebellion."

There was silence.

"Fucking *seriously*?!" Tubbo shouted.

Therapy Arc

Mistakes are proof that you are trying.

- Jennifer Lim

"Fuck," he said loudly, crossing his arms from where he sat on a couch across from the Blazeborn known as Bad, in Standard. Apparently, his real name was hardly pronounceable to Tommy's tongue.

Bad raised an eyebrow at him.

"Aren't you supposed to say language?" he complained, leaning his head back on the couch and staring at the tiled ceiling.

"I say that when I'm in personal business," Bad said, amused. "What you use as a coping mechanism, as long as it doesn't harm yourself or others, is okay with me. That includes swearing—swearing is actually one of the nicer coping methods to have after traumatic events."

"I still don't see why I need to see a psychiatrist," he muttered.

"Two days and fourteen hours ago, need I remind you that you attempted to kill yourself?" Bad said, his tone never changing—even Purpled had had that silent judgment behind his voice—Bad did not.

"It...wasn't," he said slowly.

"Wasn't it?" Bad asked softly.

Tommy sighed. After the...well, the teenagers of the ship had left him to rest, Purpled had come early the following day to escort him to the room next door—he didn't bother saying that he could walk himself; many arguments were winnable, and that absolutely hadn't been one of them. He hadn't seen hide or hair of any of the—Adults™, as Purpled so obviously enjoyed calling them—besides that not-so-argument argument that Wilbur and Phil had had. Not even a message on his datapad. Well, barring Niki. But Niki just gave him a sad look when she gave him a round of hyposprays that he didn't even attempt to bat away and wouldn't talk about jumping in the water to save him when he asked.

He supposed he deserved that. He didn't really blame them.

Then again, Purpled also told him that it was part of the Fleet jurisdictions that he couldn't speak to anybody before he saw a therapist. Purpled had, of course, broken the rules to allow the Youth™ to see him. Which had been nice.

"Sort of," he admitted. "I wondered if I could step on the air to fly."

"Was there anything important about that place that you decided to...make your move?" Bad asked cautiously, adjusting his glasses.

He frowned. "I don't think it was my original intention. That's just the place that I used to walk and talk with Sniff." Tommy shrugged. "Things sort of escalated after I had time to think about it."

"So," Bad said. "Given the chance, would you say that if you were given a place and time to *think* again, you might make the same decision?"

Tommy shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know. People have to stop dying around me first. When they stop doing that, I'll stop thinking that maybe I don't deserve a place in this world."

"Does this have anything to do with the three thousand, two hundred, and seventy children that were murdered under Chroma's hand?"

"I don't want to talk about that," Tommy said tightly. Bad had clearly done research if he remembered the exact number that always hung in Tommy's waking mind.

He refused to answer another question for the rest of the session.

Tommy was alone in the cafeteria around three in the morning, Standard time, eating a salad. He wasn't stupid enough to think he was *entirely* alone—he knew that Clementine watched over him with orders, and if Tommy did anything...off...that she was to wake up four different people. Phil, Tubbo, Niki, and Purpled. The last one wasn't officially part of the list to begin with, but Purpled managed to manipulate his way into getting on it.

He saw movement out of the corner of his eyes as he picked at the leafy greens imported from—he thought perhaps that it was Atlantis, from the blue-purple shades and the triangular shape that some of them had. Niki's planet. They tasted slightly salty, like seaweed. Which made sense, since Atlantis was a water planet.

Wilbur slid into the seat across from him, and Tommy's breath caught in his throat. He knew—he'd *known* that their relationship wouldn't be the same since, and he'd known that a conversation was coming up about what had happened. Unlike many things—unlike *everything*—he couldn't avoid it forever.

"Hey, Toms," Wilbur said quietly. "How've you been?"

Tommy snorted, stabbing his fork repeatedly at the leaves. "Cut the bullshit, Wilbur Soot." Wilbur blinked at him, looking much like a guppy with his wide eyes and parted mouth. "Ask the real fucking question."

"Okay," Wilbur said slowly. "Why'd you try to kill yourself, and are you going to try to again?"

Tommy grunted, stabbing his fork so hard into the bowl that one of the prongs snapped, bouncing onto the floor with a slight clatter. "Well, at least you're not a pussy about it," he muttered. "I don't know, Wil."

"Don't know what?"

"Why," he said. "And if it's going to happen again." Tommy tilted his head again. "Well, I suppose I can sort of explain it. I went to the Golden Gate Bridge because I used to meet up with Sniff there. It wasn't in my original plan to jump off the bridge—funny story; actually, I usually stand on the railing."

"Why?" Wilbur asked again, sounding sort of horrified, his brown eyes boring into Tommy's.

He shrugged. "Avians don't fall unless they want to," he explained. "Well, at least, I don't. Sort of hard to slip and fall if you control the air, hmm?" Tommy shook his head, laughing to himself as he dropped the fork onto the table loudly. "I just...did. And then I stood there, and I realized that it was my fault that the children of Pogtopia were dead."

"That's..." Wilbur trailed off. "That's not what Purpled said."

"Purpled was fucking delirious and inebriated off his arse on starvation," Tommy snapped. "He doesn't know anything." Wilbur frowned but didn't argue—though he clearly disagreed. "But anyway, I realized that people tend to die around me."

"That's not..."

Tommy jabbed a finger in his direction. "Blame me for it, don't blame me for it. I don't fucking care. But *you* know that's the truth. People *do* tend to die around me." Wilbur opened his mouth, and Tommy raised an eyebrow, waiting for words.

"It's not your fault," Wilbur said finally, playing with the frayed end of his yellow sweater. Tommy wondered about the cow sweater that the Phantom had—the one that Sniff had too.

"Is it?" he asked. "Everyone knows that I'm the only one here—"

"—that knows the truth?" Wilbur finished. Tommy inclined his head. "That's not true. You're the only one here who's *been* through it. The full story is out there, hidden in one of the files the Admiral has." He waved his hand meaninglessly. "'Course, *I* don't know it. Phil doesn't either. Nor, I think, do Ponk or Punz, and they're Purpled's brothers."

"Eret might," Tommy suggested, speaking of Purpled's therapist—and also one of Tubbo and Lani's guardians. He didn't mention Toast, the Vice-Admiral.

"Patient confidentiality," Wilbur said stoutly. "He couldn't even tell the government should they order him to. And they wouldn't because that's against the laws."

"Really?" Tommy asked.

"Yeah, except if it's completely illegal," Wilbur said. "Like...hard drugs, murder, etcetera."

"Well, guess I shouldn't tell Bad," he said, only partially joking.

"What you did, *whatever* you did," Wilbur said carefully. "Is not murder."

"You don't know that."

"I know that Purpled looks up to you," Wilbur said quietly. "I know that he had a conference with the Vice Admiral—" Ah, so they did know. "—and while he came out with red eyes and shaking, he still looks up to you. I think we were stupid for thinking that you two just met."

"You *are* stupid," Tommy said calmly, and Wilbur snorted and reached up into his own hair, messing up his head of brown curls. "No, seriously. I didn't exactly hide it very well."

"You didn't let it slip," Wilbur said.

"Oh, come *on*," he said. "Surely you're smarter than that." Wilbur raised an eyebrow. "I got a panic attack from the same movie that a second survivor of the Red Planet's Genocide got. I kept my secrets so tightly that it hurt. I was in that prison for a *reason*, Wil. A reason that nobody ever figured out."

"I mean, I just thought it was because you were an Avian..." Wilbur trailed off.

"It was," Tommy said. "I meant why I *stayed* there. Tubbo knew very well that I could have broken out." He tilted his head, salad forgotten. "After you found out that *I* was the one that broke you out seven years ago. When I was ten."

"Ah," Wilbur said, swallowing. "I assumed it was because they upped the security."

Tommy snorted. "Nah, my code still existed when Tubbo peeked at it from his datapad."

"He didn't say anything."

"Good man," Tommy said fondly.

"You minors have *got* to stop sticking together," Wilbur said warily. "First your fucking real age, and your birthday, and then yesterday—" he shuddered.

"Nobody else will," Tommy said softly, and Wilbur blinked at him. "I think it's a habit, especially for Purpled and me. Ranboo—I don't know about Ranboo."

"You're avoiding him."

Tommy's eyes flashed. "Perhaps," he admitted. "I don't know how to act around him."

"He thinks you blame him."

Tommy snorted, looking away. "The only fucking person I blame for this mess is myself," he said. "It's always me. I'm always the problem."

"So," Technoblade said as he set up a chessboard. Tommy frowned at him. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"Wow, way to be blunt," he muttered, fiddling with one of the pawns. Techno reached over and flicked his hand, and he yelped, dropping the piece.

"Put it on the board, nerd, not in your hand. You can fiddle with them once I destroy you."

Tommy rolled his eyes as he set up his pieces, considering the black things. Techno pushed the pawn in front of his king forward to spaces and leaned back, stretching his legs to the side, his pink hair that was usually tied back loose and falling over his shoulders. Tommy wondered how much care the half-Piglin put into it because it sure seemed better than ninety percent of the hair that was on this ship. "First Wilbur, and now you. Who's gonna be next, Phil? Why do you guys keep coming to me individually?"

"Because we believe in privacy," Techno said.

"Yet you're asking me that," Tommy said, picking up the horse and moving it forward a few spaces.

"As a *friend*," Techno stressed, mirroring Tommy's knight move. "Wilbur isn't going to come spill everythin' you said to me. I mean, sure, he talked about why you stayed in prison, but it's not like he recounted the whole thing." Techno rolled his eyes. "You trusted him with the information."

There was a bit of silence as they continued the game for a few more minutes.

"I mean...I sort of expected him to go tell everyone," Tommy said numbly, considering the board for a second. "It's easier than explaining it a million times."

"Sorry, nerd, but you're gonna have to *keep* explainin' it until we're a thousand percent sure you're not goin' to leap off the next tall buildin' you see."

"That's not how it works," Tommy said, rolling his eyes. "It's not that I *want* to die; it's just I want to stop causing pain to those around me."

"What, by annoying them to death?"

Tommy chucked one of the pawns that he'd captured at Techno's face. The half-Piglin—*half-Feline*, Tommy reminded himself—caught the piece deftly before setting it down. "No, bitch. People just—I dunno, tend to die around me."

"So you draw those around you into danger," Techno drawled.

"I mean," he said. "I suppose."

"Okay," Techno said. "Now what?"

"Now—" Tommy said, startled. "What?"

"Yeah," Techno said. "Now, what happens?"

"Um..." he said. "I leave? So you don't die?" Whether that was by dying or going off, he didn't know.

"Yeah, that's not exactly how things work," Techno snorted. "Sorry, kid, but we *want* you here."

"Why?" he asked dumbly.

"Because Phil wants you to be the pilot one day?" Techno said, and Tommy blinked, startled. "Yeah, didn't know that? You think Dream's gonna be the pilot forever? The nerd doesn't even *want* that position. And, well, you can do some cool things. You saved Kristin on that one mission, and you're an Avian. Wilbur thinks you're funny."

"And you?"

"Well, I think you're annoying," Techno said, and Tommy wilted. "Sometimes," the half-Piglin added. "Only sometimes. And that's only 'cause you're loud. And I'm an introvert. But, uh—you're humorous. Occasionally."

"Wow, is that a compliment?"

"I can start listin' off your negative traits if you so desire," Techno deadpanned.

"No, no," Tommy said with a wide grin. "Give me a moment to bask in the compliment given to me by *the* Technoblade."

"You're more famous than me at the moment," Techno told him.

Tommy's grin vanished for half a second before he plastered it on his face, ignoring the sick feeling that entered his stomach. "That's because I'm cool and amazing."

"I will chuck this piece at your head if you don't get that smug smirk off your face," Techno deadpanned. "But uh—it's funny when you make fun of Wil."

"And call Phil old?" Tommy added, moving a rook forward three spaces, hand *tap-tap-tapping* against the wooden board.

"Course," Techno snorted, smiling for a brief second. Tommy caught a glimpse of where his tusks came from, where Tommy's mandibular teeth would have been.

"He's married," Tommy said. "That automatically makes him old."

"He's only fifty-three."

"That's like, really old."

"Not for an Elytrian," Techno huffed. "I'm twenty-four."

"Yeah, and you're old too."

"Of course you would think that," Techno grumbled. There was another long period of silence, and Tommy cursed loudly as he surveyed the board, realizing that in four moves, he would lose—and there was no getting out of it. Wordlessly, he collected his pieces, glaring at the pink-haired half-Piglin, setting up a new game. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"You're not usually polite," he grumbled.

"It's sort of a private question."

"Um..." he said. "I mean, sure. Go ahead."

"What was it like, to be a kid and fight against the government?" Tommy froze his hand in the middle of taking one of Techno's pawns. "You don't...have to answer if you don't want to."

"No," he said. "No, I actually...that's one of the better questions you could've asked." Techno frowned at him, and Tommy drew in the piece in his fingers and traced it with the pads of his fingers. "It...it wasn't my original plan to—you know, stage a rebellion. We were just a friend group. I was—I was twelve, almost thirteen when I met Purpled and Ranboo and Alyssa and Foolish—that's not his real name—and near the end, Grian—fourteen and fifteen when the sickness

happened. I wasn't the oldest. In fact, I think I was the youngest. But—but I suppose that they considered me the leader of our group, and we would lie in fields of golden grass and just talk." Tommy let out a shaky breath. "I think...I know that the grass is brown now, 'cause the vegetation died. But it...it was nice. Because the sky was beautiful and nothing like I'd ever seen before—nothing I've seen since, either—and Chroma was just—he was just the guy that rescued me from the prison. It was—it was just a school, and maybe for a moment, I could forget that I didn't have a family." Tommy bit his lip as he put down the chess piece—perhaps he dropped it; he couldn't really tell—and stuck his hands under his thighs to stop them from shaking.

Breathe in. Breathe out. One. Two. Three.

It was Clementine's voice that echoed in his head.

"And then...then everything changed," he said, his voice a whisper. Techno blinked at him. "I was in—I was in his office." *Breathe in. Breathe out.* "I saw the list. The plants had been dying—I assumed it was just winter, y'know? Grian told me differently, but I—I was kinda clueless and stupid. And well—I didn't hate Chroma as much as I should have. Grian told me that our relationship wasn't normal—" Techno's face went deathly white, and Tommy hurried to clarify. "—not, not like *that*, but I'm aware enough now that it was...physical abuse and manipulation of my loss and feelings. I...I saw a list on his desk. I saw—Ranboo and Grian and Alyssa. Their names. They were going to die, and so—I went back, and I told them to run. I lied to them and said that the five of them were all on the list. The five of them—they ran, because they believed me. I stayed. I stayed because I thought that maybe I could convince Chroma to not—" He cut himself off.

"Hey, hey," Techno said, scooting over. "Tommy, you need—you need to breathe."

He felt lightheaded. "The next day," he gasped. "Half the children were executed. I should have—I should have been better. I didn't—I should have told them. I could have saved more."

"You were what—thirteen? Fourteen?" Tommy gave a shaky nod—fourteen, technically, and nearing fifteen, but it didn't quite matter. "Nothing about that situation is your fault. Nobody blames you."

"Everybody that can blame me is dead," Tommy said weakly, closing his eyes and letting the memories wash over him. "I can't—sometimes...sometimes I hear their voices. Just—blaming me. My nightmares." He forced himself to take a few shaky breaths in and out. "Do you think—do you think if they still lived, they would hate me?"

"No," Techno said. "You're a good kid, Tommy. Your awareness—your *regret*, even for something that isn't your fault, makes you a better person than you think you are."

Tommy smiled at him.

He lost the next four chess games and then went to bed.

He dreamed of blood and death and grey eyes.

Tommy wasn't particularly surprised when Niki told him that he wasn't allowed to go back to school just yet—Bad told him nicely that he was a flight risk. Which was stupid because he couldn't even fly.

He also wasn't surprised that he now had a chip in his arm that surveyed his position and his vitals—it was really a downer and also an invasion of privacy—and yet, he understood why they'd chosen to do this. He saw the tiny bit of metal underneath his wrist and knew that he could rip it out—maybe bleed to death without proper medical care, but still.

He didn't.

He was sort of glad that he didn't get to go to school—not because it wasn't fun, but because of the two classes that would now bear an empty seat for the rest of the semester next to him. He...wasn't quite ready to not be able to turn to Sniff and copy off her notes or roll his eyes when the teacher was stupid.

She was gone, but a bit of her still remained—if that made any sense at all.

Tommy knocked carefully on Phil's cabin two days later, scratching at the chip in his arm in annoyance. It opened with little fanfare, and Tommy blinked in surprise when he saw Wilbur, Techno, and Phil all in there.

"Sorry," he blurted. "I'll come back when you're not busy."

"We're not busy," Phil said. "Come on in, mate."

"Uh..." he said, stepping into the room nervously. "Okay."

"Hey, gremlin," Wilbur said fondly, flipping through a book that Techno *had* to have lent him—who else would have such shitty taste—that the Phantom carried everywhere when he wasn't on duty. And since the *L'manburg* was still undergoing physical repairs, he carried that stupid psychology book everywhere.

Still, Tommy flipped him off flawlessly, and Wilbur sputtered slightly. "Anyway, I got a message from Sniff's parents." Phil looked up at him, and Techno blinked. "They uh—they wanted to video call. You know. To arrange things."

"Ah," Phil said. "Don't you have a video call screen in one of the conference rooms?"

"Yeah," he said. "But I was—you know. I didn't want to—" his voice caught in his throat.

"Ah," Phil said. "You didn't want to talk to them alone."

"Yeah," he said finally. "I'm afraid they'll blame me for—you know. Her death and all that shit." Tommy laughed, but it wasn't a warm one. "I'll uh—I'll ask them to reschedule it, 'cause you're busy."

"No," Wilbur said. "It's fine. Come on, Tech. I gotta show you something cool."

"Okay," Techno said evenly, standing up and braiding his hair quickly, pulling a piece of twine from his pocket and wrapping it around the pink ends. As he passed by Tommy, he clapped him warmly on the shoulder, his eyes twinkling with acceptance and understanding. Tommy ducked as Wilbur scruffed up his hair fondly, waving goodbye to Phil and ducking out the door.

"Sorry," Tommy said again. "For ruining your—meeting."

"It wasn't a meeting," Phil said, patting the place on the bed next to him. Tommy sat down, trying not to see that flash of pale green feathers as Phil moved his to compensate for the boy sitting beside him. His dreams were starting to affect his real life, and he hated it. "Did you know that I am also Techno and Wilbur's legal guardians?"

Tommy blinked. "Um...no, actually."

"Yeah," Phil sighed. "Of course, my power as a parent is gone..." he sniffed. "They're all grown up."

Tommy whacked his shoulder. "They're still on your crew," he said. "It's not like they've left or anything."

Phil sighed. "I know, I know," he said. "Tech lost his parents after the um—the *H.M.S Fran* incident, and Wilbur never had any...so you know. I did what I thought was right. They're my kids, even though they're not by blood."

"I understand why Wilbur is aging swiftly and poorly now," Tommy muttered. "Taking after his parents."

"Did you just call me old?"

"No," he said. "Of course not. You're hearing things."

Phil smiled at him, and Tommy felt the soft feathers inch around his shoulder. Somehow, it was comforting. "You want to get this meeting started?"

Tommy hesitated. "I'm scared," he admitted. "I...I'm afraid."

"They'll never blame you," Phil told him. "And if they do, I'll give them a fucking piece of my mind. Sniff did what she thought was right."

"And it was, wasn't it?" Tommy said.

"The world ain't just black and white, mate," Phil told him. "It's not just *right* and *wrong*. Sure, that's how everything is portrayed, but people aren't just villains and heroes in real life. Other factors determine a person's actions—revenge, tenacity, whether they *think* what they're doing is right...manipulation...the list goes on."

"Chroma is evil," Tommy told him.

Philza laughed. "Yes, perhaps you're right on that. He may have his reasons, but in the end, he did kill three thousand children." Philza waved towards the screen on the wall. "Now, let's get this meeting over and done with, shall we?"

Meeting the parents (of my dead friend)

Chapter Notes

In hindsight, maybe I should have made Tommy play a sport.

I've never taken a single music lesson, or played an instrument. So. Yeah. Sorry for the shit rendition of musical arts...

ALSO!!! MORE POG ART!! [rt_nique](#) created an AMAZINIG cover rendition of the execution of Grian, Foolish, & Alyssa (R.I.P) [here](#)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Music is a moral law. It gives soul to the universe,
wings to the mind, flight to the imagination,
and charm and gaiety to life and to everything.*

- Plato

At first glance, Sniff's parents looked nothing like her. They had wings like Phil—different feather shapes, heights, and widths, but they were nothing like their daughter. Her father had a dark forest green wing color that reminded Tommy of the evergreen trees and her mother a pale snow.

At a second glance, he could see the similarities. Not in the way they held themselves or the redness around their eyes that Tommy knew he shared—but in their eyes. Sniff's Elytrian mother had her blue eyes, and her father the dimples around his lips, though he wasn't smiling now.

"You must be Tommy," Sniff's mother said eventually. "And you are..." she frowned as she took in Phil. "His adoptive father?"

"Nah, I'm just his guardian," Phil said quickly. "Captain Philza of the *L'manburg*. Nice to meet you...?" He trailed off, giving the go-ahead for introductions.

"I am Ch'lse'ae," the mother said, crossing her legs, her white wings shifting as she blinked. "This is my husband, H'kaly'pi."

Tommy wondered if *Phil*, or even Philza, was Phil's real name. Probably not. Speaking of that, the other Elytrian on the ship—Hannah. That probably wasn't her real name either.

"We have heard a lot about you, Captain Philza," H'kaly'pi mentioned. "You do a great service representing our people in the Galactic Rebellion."

"I'm glad that I can," Philza said, though Tommy detected a hint of dryness in his tone. "However, this is not why we decided to chat today."

"No," Ch'lse'ae sighed. "We came to speak about our daughter." Her hands shake slightly before H'kaly'pi grabbed them in a moment of affection and promise.

She seemed unable to utter the following words, so Tommy spoke up. "Sni'yfyer'ich."

He supposed she really was a fallen angel, now.

Ch'lse'ae's lips part slightly in surprise, her dark eyebrows disappearing under her bangs as she raises them involuntarily. "You said her name right."

"Of course I did," Tommy said, slightly affronted. Phil's wing moved, brushing against his back and calming him down slightly. "She's uh—she was—is—um...yeah. She was my friend." He hated the way he stuttered, but Sniff's parents—and Phil—didn't seem to mind.

"Just because she was your friend doesn't mean you know how to say it right," H'kaly'pi said lightly. "I didn't know Humans had the capacity for our language." The way he said it made it seem like an insult, but Phil's lips twitched, and Tommy realized that it was just an observation.

"I am...not human," he said. "I'm an Avian."

"Ah," Ch'lse'ae murmured, her blue eyes—achingly reminding him of Sniff—parting in surprise. "So you are Thomas Innes, the son of Sam Innes?"

"Yes," he said, frowning. "Though I'm surprised you've heard of me."

"I would be surprised if every Galactic Rebellion planet has not heard of you," Ch'lse'ae said. "Your father and aunt were quite famous during their time."

"Oh," he said.

H'kaly'pi sighed. "Usually, we would wait for you to arrive on Elytra, Tommy, but this matter surpasses this." Tommy frowned. "Sni'yfyer'ich has a feather for you."

Phil inhaled sharply, but Tommy was just confused. "What?"

"Sniff was our biological daughter," Ch'lse'ae explained gently.

"I—I know," he said, and both parents blinked in surprise. "She told me."

"That is surprising," H'kaly'pi said. "Her last in-person words were screaming at us that she would never tell anyone what she was." A flash of sadness crossed his brown eyes. "That she would not garner pity from any other source."

Tommy blinked. "I think..." he started, pausing. "I think it's because she...she knew we had some things in common." Both of Sniff's parents frowned. "Of course, I'm not an Elytrian, and—well, I'll never understand the pain of losing your wings, but...I do understand pain at a young age. That—apologies don't do much, and I was also afraid that people would look at me differently should they know the truth." He felt Phil's hand slip into his, grounding him, and he squeezed his guardian's hand tightly, glad of the continuous brush of feathers across his back.

"Because you...lost your parents?" Ch'lse'ae said carefully.

"Because I am a survivor of the Red Planet's Genocide," he admitted, holding his chin high as Phil's feathers rustled, though his face remained impassive. H'kaly'pi and Ch'lse'ae looked shocked. "I told her that that day on the Golden Gate Bridge when she told me." He sighed. "She is...she was the first person I told."

"I understand why she named a feather for you," H'kaly'pi said finally. "I mourn with thee."

"And you for yours," he said eventually, remembering that lesson from Interspecies Protocol. Phil looked mildly surprised. "What does naming a feather mean?"

Ch'lse'ae and H'kaly'pi glanced at each other. "Nothing that is said about our culture can leave this room," Sniff's mother said eventually. Tommy nodded.

"Tommy, just as your race has your secrets, the Elytrians have ours," Phil said. "Mostly cultural things. The naming of a feather is one of them."

"Right," Ch'lse'ae said. "It is...something that we Elytrians do." She spread one of her pale snowy wings, showcasing her feathers. "Feathers fall like leaves in fall. Easily. Routinely. There is no meaning behind them. Flight feathers—" she gestured at the outmost layers of her feathers. "Sometimes do as well. But when you pull one out, when you give it the name of a person and put it in your keepsake box, it shows that you care for them, even after death."

"These ones," Phil clarified, taking Tommy's hand and placing it on a specific layer of feathers that the Elytrian man had.

"We all have our boxes," Ch'lse'ae continued. "I thought—I thought Sni'yfyer'ich would have burnt ours after what we did to her, but when we collected her belongings..."

"She never hated you," Tommy said. "I think—I think she was annoyed that you were protective, that you thought of her as a flightless, broken bird that would never fly again. And—well, she changed. She grew up, and you never got past your daughter's injuries."

"A mistake on our part," H'kaly'pi said softly. "But I am glad to hear she held no hatred for us."

Ch'lse'ae nodded. "Her feathers for us are older. Younger flight feathers—smaller, from when she was very young and young enough to know what it meant and name ones after us." She sighed. "Sni'yfyer'ich never had any more feathers to give after she lost her wings."

"She named one more, didn't she?" Phil asked, always the perceptive one. "To Tommy?"

"Yes," Ch'lse'ae said finally. "She did. It's made out of gold leaf." H'kaly'pi stood up and walked out of the frame as Tommy stared in shock. The forest-winged Elytrian soon returned, bearing a small wooden box with the silver engraving of his daughter's name on it.

He opened it to reveal three feathers. Two of them were pale green and bore the embroidered names of her parents. The last one, and the newest, was far more delicate. It was a beautiful, woven gold.

It displayed the sobriquet *Tommy* in Sniff's handwriting.

Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes as he scrutinized it.

"It is yours to keep once you arrive," H'kaly'pi continued, closing the receptacle and placing it to the side. "Most people create necklaces to wear on naming day or elaborate headdresses." He shrugged. "It is yours to do as you wish, though I do not suppose I have ever seen a feather like this before."

"Of course," Tommy said shakily. "I would be honored."

"Her Final Flight will take place in about a week and a half," Ch'lse'ae said. "We do not usually have this many outsiders—Captain Philza, I talked to your Chief Communications Officer, and he said that there will be—three? A Human, Tommy, and a Shulker."

"Lani and Drista," he realized.

"That's correct," Phil said after a moment. "For her Final Flight. But we'll be there for the ceremony."

"Of course," Ch'lse'ae said diplomatically. "We would be honored to host the crew of the *L'manburg* in the mountains of Ponyo."

"Until then, then," Tommy said.

"Until then, Tommy," H'kaly'pi said.

The connection cut out, and Tommy bowed his head onto Phil's shoulder, half-expecting the Elytrian to push him off. He was exhausted—because they'd been talking about *Sniff*, and even though she had...died in his arms, it still felt surreal.

"Hey, mate," Phil said soothingly, reaching an arm around Tommy and pulling him close as he began to sob.

"She—*why* am I such a—a crybaby, Phil?" he said, melting into the older man's arms. "Every time I think about her being dead, I just want to curl up into a fucking ball and cry—when does this hole in my heart go away?" It hurt...that dark space that Sniff had once inhabited as a friend had been ripped away the moment that her eyes had turned as misty as Alyssa's had. Just another hole in his shattered body.

"It doesn't," Phil said simply. "You just learn to deal with it. I'm sorry, Tommy, but there's no fixing something like this. I talked to Purpled years ago about this when he asked—I think he was talking about you, actually." Tommy bit back a giant sob, his throat hurting. "Some things—some things cannot be fixed. They can only be carried, and your shoulders will bend from the weight, and your stomach will feel like it's eating itself out, and sometimes you feel like you want to die." Phil looked down at him, blue eyes meeting cyan, and Tommy was surprised to find understanding there—just a glimmer, but it is there. "The reality is that you will grieve forever—for Sniff, for Alyssa, for Grian, for Foolish, for your parents, for you aunt—for whoever is next lost." Tommy let out a pained sound, and Phil made a little shushing crooning sound. He felt so diminutive, curled under Phil's wing and against his chest and shoulder. "You will never get over the loss of a loved one—you will only live with it. You will heal, and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be *whole* again, one day, but you will never be the same."

His hands were shaking. His vision was blurry from the tears. His shirt was soaked.

"Nor should you be the same," Phil continued, rocking him gently—and maybe if he was clearheaded, he would have pushed away; maybe if he wasn't recovering from death itself, he would have been ashamed of this. "Nor should you want to." He smiled gently. "If our love was enough to save someone, then they would live forever."

Tubbo and Tommy were in his dorm room, cleaning it out—Niki talked to the Vice-Admiral, and apparently, they were teaming up against him, 'cause now he was moving out of the dorms onto the *L'manburg*. He didn't dare ask what would happen when the *L'manburg* was finally repaired—for an extended period; it could already go on flights, like when they'd flown out to the *U.S.S. Midway* to survey the damage at the Vice-Admiral's askance.

"There's a talent show in three days," Tubbo mentioned as he threw a spoiled bag of M&M's into one of the trashbags. "Friday."

"Mmm," Tommy hummed, from where he stood on the chair tearing down the L.E.D. Lights. He'd need to reapply the sticky stuff on the other side. "You in it?"

"Yeah," Tubbo sighed.

"Does the crew know?"

"No."

"Ah," Tommy said. "What are you doing?"

"Playing the piano," Tubbo replied, chucking a hanger at him. Tommy caught it deftly, throwing it in the hanger pile.

"Any song yet?"

"No," Tubbo muttered. "I dunno what to do." He brightened. "Hey! You should play too!"

"*Absolutely* not," Tommy scoffed. "I haven't touched the piano in *years*, Big Man, I—"

There was a knock on the door. Both boys paused like deer in headlights. Tommy jumped down from the chair that he was standing on, walking over to the door. "I'll answer it," he said, and Tubbo hummed in response, going back to packing Tommy's meager items of clothing that he'd bought with the school's allowance.

He opened it and blinked in surprise at the Elytrian that stood there, with raven-toned wings and a jet-black suit. He looked solemn, yet stood ramrod straight. Tommy glanced further into the corridor and noted the large bin that lay on the ground.

"Is this the current residence of Thomas Innes?" the Elytrian said roughly.

"Uh, yes," Tommy sputtered. "I—I'm Tommy. Tommy Innes. Nice to—uh, meet you?" Behind him, Tubbo snorted, and Tommy turned and glared at the Shulker.

"I am Sni'yfyer'ich's assigned B'laq'rah'veyn," the Elytrian said, as if that explained everything. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a smaller, more ornate box. Tommy recognized it to be made of the same dark wood that Sniff's parents had held. He blinked as it was all but shoved into his hands. The Elytrian looked at him wordlessly, and Tommy supposed that he should probably open it.

The gold leaf feather that Sniff had named for him gleamed in the overhead lights, and Tommy felt his jaw go slack, his hands shaking slightly as he beheld his name twisted in embroidery, glinting in its artwork.

"It was delivered earlier this morning," the Elytrian continued as if Tommy wasn't holding—arguably—one of the most precious things in the world. "Along with a letter from Sni'yfyer'ich's parents for what I shall pass to you, Tommy Innes." He stepped aside and gestured to the large box.

"This is for you, from her." Tommy gaped stupidly at him, and he bowed formally. "May her Final Flight be remembered for all eternity. I mourn with thee."

Before Tommy could remember his etiquettes and return the formality, the Elytrian—Sniff's black raven, or whatever it was in Elytrian tongue, was gone, not even a feather remaining.

"Tommy?" Tubbo said, appearing at his side.

"Look," he said numbly, angling the box towards the Shulker, who stood on his tip-toes to gaze at it.

"It's pretty," Tubbo observed. "What is it?"

"It's Sniff's feather," he answered. "Well, one she made. Since she didn't have any feathers named after me. Something about traditions." He bit his tongue as he remembered Sniff's parents' words—something about not spilling cultural secrets. But to be fair, that Elytrian had also shown up at his door while Tubbo had been *here*, so he could just feign plausible deniability.

Tubbo looked like he had a million questions but didn't ask them, for which Tommy was immensely appreciative of. Tubbo *had* graduated early—and had taken Interspecies Protocol; he probably knew not to ask about the confidential cultural practices of other species. "What about the box?"

"I think that's some of the stuff her parents designated to give to me," Tommy mumbled, closing the box with a small *snick*. "Nothing secretive. Just...items, I suppose."

"Ah," Tubbo said. "Want to open it?"

He stared at it for a second, clenching and unclenching his sweaty palms. "...Sure."

The two boys dragged the bin into the room, Tommy wincing at the scraping dissonance that the container's substructure made against the already harshed-up wooden floorboards. It wasn't cumbersome, but it still weighed down on Tommy as if it were a thousand tons. He placed the small

feather-bearing box on the nightstand reverently, swearing that he would remember it on his way out and put it somewhere safe until it was time to head to Elytra.

Tubbo waited patiently as Tommy opened the lid—he was sure he took far longer than was strictly *necessary*, as his hands were shaking, but the Shulker was quiet and what seemed like understanding was visible in his brown eyes.

At least it wasn't pitying.

Tommy hated pity.

He blinked in surprise at the contents. It—it wasn't multiple items like he assumed it would be—it was only one, nestled in a layer of blankets that protected it despite the casing.

"*Oh!*" Tubbo murmured delightedly, putting a hand on the edge of the bin.

A violin. It was Sniff's *violin*.

Tommy lifted the case out, breathing sharply outwards. It wasn't cheap by any means; he could tell that simply by feeling the material of the casing. And it wasn't some practical joke of only being the casing either—no, he could feel the heftiness of it. Tommy laid it carefully on the ground and unzipped the silver zippers, tears pricking the corners of his eyes as he remembered the conversation about violins he'd had with the Elytrian—one of their many endless ones on endless things.

It was beautiful. The case was a brilliant black; the inside a splendid navy blue. The instrument inside was even more beautiful—the body was untarnished, the chinrest clean and gleaming. The bow was in perfect condition—*of course, it was*, he told himself harshly. The ebony and rosewood of the fingerboard did not have a single fingerprint on it despite lying behind the strings, nor the bridge made of maple wood—and the soundboard a classic spruce that gleamed under the dirty lights of the dorm room.

This had been Sniff's property. It was as neat as her notes, as the way she organized her books and food—it was *hers*, down to the handprinted stylized initials that had marked it as hers.

It was his now, he supposed.

"It's a violin," Tubbo said. "Sniff's violin." Okay, well, way to point out the obvious. It did have her name on it. He tilted his head. "I wonder why she left it to you."

"Because I know how to play," he murmured. "I learned this instrument at Pogtopia."

"Oh," Tubbo said, his eyes widening.

"I couldn't—can't—play the piano anymore," he admitted sadly, his hand touching the violin gently, its coolness grounding him as he tried to block out the horrific memories of the Red Planet's Genocide. "So—so Alyssa taught me how to play this."

"You could play with me," Tubbo suggested softly, and Tommy jerked his hand back like he'd been burned, suddenly aware of how vulnerable he was behaving.

"What?" he asked.

"A duet," Tubbo said. "For the talent show." He took a small breath, seemingly trying to build up the courage for his following words. "For—for Sniff."

"But...you..." Tommy started. "You'd ruin your performance, Big Man—"

"No, Tommy," Tubbo corrected gently. "I'd like to do this, I think. It was never really my intention to win—who knows if I could—more like...do something dramatic with thousands of people watching." He tilted his head. "It's not ruining it, Tommy. I liked Sniff too."

Tommy blinked at him. At the piano that leaned against the corner, gleaming. It was his, but he knew that he would never prefer it over the instrument that lay in its beautiful case in front of him. Perhaps once. Maybe one day, he would play it again without crying and find the joy it had once brought him—that day wasn't now, nor anytime soon.

"Okay," he said finally. "What do you have in mind?"

A brilliant grin crossed Tubbo's face. "I have the *perfect* song."

"So you moved into the *L'manburg*," Bad noted. It wasn't really a question.

He snorted, tapping his fingers against the wood that peeked out at the corners of the sofa arms. It was a designing choice, but he would use it to make as much noise as possible. Perhaps he could annoy Bad into letting him out of the session early. Though the Blazeborn probably wouldn't make a very good therapist if he got annoyed by Tommy simply tapping on the wood. "It wasn't really my own decision."

"You have to realize, Tommy, that this is for your own safety," Bad said patiently.

He waved Bad off. "Good for them. That doesn't mean I have to like it."

There was a bit of silence.

"No," Bad said slowly. "I suppose it doesn't." He fixed his glasses absentmindedly. "I think you should get out some time."

Tommy blinked, glancing up. "Like...leave?"

"No," Bad said quickly. "Like get some fresh air."

"It's not *my* fault you won't let me go back to school."

Bad frowned. "We've already agreed that you'll go back after the visit to Elytra."

"You're making it sound like a fucking vacation," he said pragmatically. "It's a funeral for a good friend."

"I didn't mean it to sound like that," Bad said, correcting himself. "But I still think you should get some fresh air before you head to Elytra." He glanced over at the clipboard. "You could go watch Tubbo when he performs at the talent show at the Presidio of San Francisco on Friday? I'm sure he'd enjoy that."

Tommy smiled, sitting forward. "Hey, I didn't know if you knew this, Bad, but I'm performing in that with him."

Bad blinked, surprise filling his green eyes. Then he brightened. "That's a good idea, Tommy! Does Phil know?"

"It's a surprise."

"You sure keep a lot of secrets," the Blazeborn noted, squinting at him.

"What are you, my—" Tommy cut himself off and shook his head, snorting. "Of course. Yeah, you're my therapist. Psychological analyzer and all that fuckery."

"I'd prefer to be your friend."

"You're here because of work, not because I want to be here," Tommy corrected.

"Yes, but I *do* care for you both professionally and unprofessionally," Bad said calmly.

Tommy snorted. "It's a surprise this time," he said. "Don't worry. It's not some earth-shattering secret."

Bad blinked at him. "What instrument are you playing?"

"The uh," he said. "The violin."

"Ah," Bad said. "I wasn't aware that you were learning."

"I...I'm not," he said, his stomach strangely in his throat. "I learned on the Red Planet. Alyssa taught me." He let out a small breath, prying his fingernails from his skin and staring at the small crescents the stress has left behind. His fingers hurt from practicing. "It was a secret. Only she knew—Ranboo found out accidentally, but he doesn't know anymore." He laughed dryly, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his palm.

"I don't think you're aware of how many secrets that you have," Bad said observingly.

Tommy snorted. "Right."

"No," Bad said. "Go on. What's another secret your hold?"

"Um..." Tommy said blankly. He squeezed his eyes shut, genuinely trying to think of something. "I've killed people."

Bad's eyes widened. "That's not on your file."

"Sure," Tommy shrugged. "But the most recent ones were those Arachnids on the bridge of Merikh Rience's ship."

"I thought they were unconscious."

Tommy blinked. "No," he said carefully. "I cut off the oxygen to their lungs. I stopped their hearts." He shook his head. "It was an accident, but I don't regret it."

"So," Bad said. "Let me get this straight. You don't regret killing those Arachnids?"

He sneered. "Of fucking *course* not. They were the ones who murdered my parents, after all." He forced himself to loosen his grip on the couch. "I regret many things, Bad," he said honestly. "Many, many things that I would have changed—that I blame myself for, and I always will." Bad frowned at him, but Tommy held up a hand, cutting him off. "I am not good. I am not perfect." It nearly mirrored Purpled's words, the way he said it. "Far from it, actually. Killing those Arachnids—perhaps it wasn't right. Maybe they should have gone to trial. Maybe they would have died anyway." Tommy shrugged slightly, looking the green-eyed man in the eyes. "But that—given the opportunity to redo my life, to redo *everything*, would I redo that? No." It was stout and firm, and if there was anything that he knew, it was *that*. "Would I redo killing the guards on Pogtopia when they hid food and beat the other children to death as they begged? No, Bad, I don't, and won't *ever*, regret it."

Chapter End Notes

we have finals this week and next week, so I'm going to postpone the next update to next Tuesday instead of friday. sorry guys!

as for the pronunciation of sniff's parents - go crazy.

you cannot hear me weep (nor see me talk)

Chapter Notes

yep im sick but fortunately for prewritten chapters this is going up

AMAZING ART!!!

[0_RayRay_0](#) created some fantabulous art [here](#) of Tommy Innes!

[HannahLoveAcke1](#) created some extraordinary beautiful art as well [here!](#)

[Liz](#), as usual, had some brilliant marker art of Sniff and Tommy (sadness) [here](#)

Thank you so much for all the art!

SPECIAL THANKS TO [JELLO12451](#) FOR WRITING THE MUSICAL SCENE BECAUSE I SUCK AT MUSIC! They did a wonderful job! You might have heard of one of their works, [Symphonies of Friends and Sonatas of Rivals](#), OR, [Retake](#), [Retaliate](#), [Rejoice](#), the third installment of my RRR series! They're an amazing author and I definitely could not have written this chapter without them!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The way to get started is to quit

talking and begin doing.

- Walt Disney

It was nightttime in the park.

Tommy breathed out sharply, tears pricking at the corners of his eyes. Tubbo nodded at him from where they stood, listening to the stand-up comedy routine of the Phantom girl that stands before them.

He wished he hadn't watched the home videos that Puffy had recorded with a broad smile of him learning to fly. He saw himself, younger, covering the camera, embarrassed at his low score he'd

gotten on the simulator—though looking back, a two-hundred and ten for a six-year-old was extremely good. He heard Sam's laugh in the background, and his heart hurt.

There were hundreds of these videos stored in Clementine's archives. Some of them were like this—of him and the other crew, doing what they did—and others of mission reports. They were boring mission reports, some of them, but he'd listened to one or two—just to hear their voices again.

In the older ones, there were videos of his mother. She had his blue eyes and red hair and a wicked grin—he knew where he'd gotten his recklessness; why Sam had loved the Avian called Clara.

He could only stomach a few minutes of it before turning it off.

He hadn't touched the videos addressed to him. He couldn't stomach that either—maybe he was a coward, but he could barely watch the ones of his younger self. That was a whole other can of worms. They had been made with laughter and the knowledge that when he was older, they would watch them *together* and reflect on his growth.

He would be alone when he watched them. He would feel the spaces of his family on his sides, and he would be in more pain than ever—and so Tommy shoved them down and did not touch them.

Tubbo nudged him slightly, and Tommy blinked, distantly hearing the roaring crowd as the Phantom girl gave a small, nervous bow and the curtains shut so that the stage crew could promptly redesign the stage.

Tommy knelt down and opened the violin case, his fingers shaking slightly as he exhaled. He would be fine.

This was fine.

They had practically not talked to anybody for three days so they could practice—over and over and over and over. It wasn't perfect, but three-day practices never were.

Tommy watched as the stage crew quickly put together a grand piano—Gods knew how much fucking practice they had with *that*, but fortunately, they didn't have to fucking carry it onto the stage—what with it being the modern era and all that.

The stage crew exited the stage, one of them giving the thumbs up that they were ready and done. Tubbo nodded as the crowd settled down and the curtains opened, the Shulker padding over to the piano. Off the wings of the stage, Tommy could barely see the dozens—hundreds?—of people sitting on blankets in the late-spring park, watching the talent that the Fleet school students had.

It was dark, except for the single spotlight that lid up the seat of the piano Tubbo now sat at. As per the plan, Tommy stayed off to the side, waiting for his musical cue.

He recognized one of the judges to be Ant and felt slightly sour right then and there—as Phil had been the ones to go to his coaches and tell them that he'd quit track. But—he hadn't been able to handle it, *couldn't* be able to handle it.

The violin in his hands with Sniff's initials on it suddenly felt heavier than the weight of the world combined, and Tommy almost—almost walked away.

No, Tubbo was right.

He was Tommy-fucking-Innes, and he could *do* this. He'd been through worse than a stupid performance, after all.

Tubbo didn't bother with an introduction—perhaps the judges would not like that, but neither of them much cared.

The Shulker put his hands on the piano, and locked eyes with Tommy.

He swallowed and stepped onto the stage. Immediately, as he walked towards the downstage center of the stage, a second spotlight flickered on and bathed him in a burning spray of light. He had to blink a few times to adjust to the brilliant rays assaulting him, but he didn't miss a step as he paused at the center, ignoring the whispers.

Somewhere out there, the crew of the *L'manburg* watched, stunned as Tommy raised the violin and waited for his partner to start. He ignored the crowd in favor of staring at the rising moon in the eastern part of the sky—staring at people always made him nervous.

It was not hard to pick up the violin—a quaint little instrument, invented centuries ago, made of fragile wood and strings. The one in his hands had a more extraordinary meaning behind it—he held it both like it was his life and like it was a feather waiting to be crushed, the initials on its body glinting in the light.

The violin was fiery at times—Alyssa had taught him that much in her brief time as a teacher on Pogtopia. Perhaps Tommy would've played something more...explosive under different circumstances. The possibilities were endless—Paganini, Lalo, or Sarasate.

Not that day, though. Never that day—not for what they played, *who* they played for. Not for the crowd, but for the Elytrian girl who had given up her life so that hundreds could live.

And so when Tubbo's fingers hit the keys of the piano in front of him, playing the first rising chords of Tchaikovsky's Canzonetta, from his only- and most famous- violin concerto, there was a moment when Tommy breathed in, immersing himself in the soft notes that filled the stage and echoed off into the trees—perhaps the birdsong stopped to listen; he would never know.

He brought the bow up to play the starting D, then the ascending G minor scale. Quickly trilled on the dominant an octave above, finishing with a roll around the notes. The following phrase started off similarly, albeit there wasn't any trill this time, just notes softly descending once again. The scale extended, dropping lower until it hit the G-string.

Tubbo echoed that same scale, finishing just in time for Tommy to pick up with the same starting motif, once again.

Repeat.

Repeat whispered in his ears—a curse and a reminder that he had failed. That he *was* a failure, no matter to the end.

You could never save her. You could never save them. You are not good enough.

He gritted his teeth and cast that voice away. Truth or not—he did not have time for it at this moment.

The same notes, with the same form, though there were a few harmonics and string changes, just to add that slight flavor of texture that every musician is bent on creating. It was far from the playing of the legends, but there was no need to be a prodigy when all that was asked of you was a performance.

Tommy wouldn't call it meaningless, but perhaps, it could be considered just that in the grand scheme of things.

Perhaps this playing—this performance—was meaningless in the grand scale of things. Sniff was just another death to the universe of hundreds of billions—small and insignificant.

Not to him.

But then, he had always been small and insignificant.

Tommy's vibrato began to get more and more intense, trills moving up the notes, slowly climbing up to the high G, though that was not the end of it. Back to the A string, to hit the B-flat and D, shifting up on that exact string to play the B-flat one octave above *that*.

It was a clean shift, if Tommy did say so himself.

It was back to the third, second, and first positions after that, the notes making the most use out of the scale's raised seventh. An interesting choice of notes, Tommy mused, while his hands move of their own accord, bow ever straight and fingers ever nimble.

Tubbo gave him nothing more than a glance when he opted for the A-string instead of shifting up the D. He was an accompanist at that moment, after all, and it was his job to adapt to Tommy, no matter how hard that might be.

On instinct, Tommy's bow hand dropped down during the small interlude of Tubbo's precise playing, strings resonating in tandem with the violin. He picked his bow up and moved it again, and the piece became ever so slightly, happier- his right arm's movements were grander, vibrato more lively, and the resonance filled the stage—and, subsequently,

There was still a mute on Tommy's violin, so no matter what, the obstruction present on his bridge would still dampen the sound, but perhaps it was for the better. As much as this section was in a major key, Tubbo would see and feel the inevitable return of the minor chords.

There it was—the climax.

He saw Tubbo's eyes widen when Tommy pushed the speed forward. He knew by now that Tommy had always had a... tendency to take the music into his own hands and do whatever the fuck he wanted with it—but rubato had never been quite taken as seriously as it was now. The low notes flew high just as quickly as they fell back down again, a smooth transition back to the original motifs.

Well, every artist is bound to indulge themselves in some way or another, at some point.

And in the end, while Tommy was letting the music control him—whether that was a mistake or not, he didn't know—in the end, he was playing this for Sniff. For another person that did not deserve to die.

Tubbo was right about the song choice.

When the first section made its reappearance, more embellishments showcased the harmonic scale that this piece was centered around. Most notably, perhaps, was the section where the notes got pulled up into the octave above, in the higher positions of the E-string. If Tubbo wasn't mistaken, this was the highest part of the movement.

And even though the trills climbed up again, higher and higher, floating up to the G, the B-flat and shift that followed was, once again, on the A-string, with nothing to show that was different from the original entrance.

The chromatics. Again.

Apparently, Tubbo *was* mistaken because there was, once again, a *higher* B-flat than the G that he had originally thought was the highest note. He could hear Tommy's frustration in the way that note shook, under the sheer power of his bow and the broken bow hairs decorating the frog.

So he's doing this now.

Tubbo played nothing as Tommy's notes slowly made their way back down, as always, to the G string.

The arpeggio that followed was of the submediant, and it was an illusion of peace, for just a moment...

... but the C-sharp was always there, a constant reminder that it will always be, at its root, the minor movement of a major concerto.

The last chord was unresolved, leaving the audience waiting for something that never came. That never *would* come.

Just as he would wait for someone who would never come home—just as her parents would wait, even though they all knew she would never arrive.

Under normal circumstances, this would be the precedent of an explosive entrance from the piano, in all its Tchaikovsky-like glory. But Tommy had signed up for a peaceful canzonetta and *not* the allegro.

So he stopped and took a bow.

Tubbo stood up as well, still and silent as he took his own bow, the spotlights shutting off and flooding the stage in darkness. The audience would wait for a performance that would never finish, at the edge of their seats—they didn't even applaud, for they were confused about the sudden ending.

Death was rarely expected for the young. Her death had been like the performance—a short, sudden stop that nobody anticipated.

It was a metaphor, nothing more. Perhaps some would see it. Most would not—there would never be a formal explanation for it; they were not here to win.

They left nothing but whispers behind.

Tommy could have sworn he heard the echo of a trill of laughter in his ears as he stepped onto the grass.

Inside, he knew it was simply his imagination.

The duo sat on a bench overlooking the ocean, the wind blowing in Tommy's face. He let out a small breath, glancing over at Tubbo, who seemed to be asleep. His datapad glowed in his hands, and as Tommy watched, he snuffled slightly and curled closer into Tommy, a warm weight upon his shoulder.

He smiled and grabbed Tubbo's datapad, shooting a quick message to Ranboo, who was confused when Tubbo stopped answering.

Tubbo

↳ *hey mite this is Tommy*

Tubbo fell asleep

Husband-to-be

↳ *Ah*

Makes sense haha

Did you mean to say mite?

Tubbo

↳ *yeah it's short for those*

you know

little annoying bugs on Enderia?

you told me about them

endermites

haha you remind me of them

bitch

Husband-to-be

↳ ...

no comment.

nice performance btw

didn't expect to see you out there

:)

Tubbo

↳ *ah well*

you know

I dabble

I'm surprised Phil hasn't sent a search party for me

Husband-to-be

↳ *Tubbo told us where you were.*

You also have a tracker

:)

Tubbo

↳ *...right.*

stop with those fucking smiley faces

bitch

Be back before midnight

BIG T OUT

Tommy shut off the datapad and put it down next to Tubbo, silently wishing that the Shulker would carry a bag with him—though perhaps that would be counterproductive, as Shulkers quite literally carried fourth-dimensional pockets around them that they could access. He sighed heavily and ran a hand through his hair, noting that he needed a haircut. Maybe he would ask Philza—Phil knew everything. Most things. A lot of things.

He toed the casing of Sniff's violin and bent down, wincing a bit of the strain on his arms. Playing—primarily practicing—nonstop certainly did something to ones' muscles. Tommy unzipped the case with practiced ease, drawing the beautiful instrument out and laying it across his lap, holding it gently as he stared down at it. Tubbo stirred sleepily, muttering something about bees and honey. Tommy smiled at him softly and stood up, gently letting Tubbo slide onto the bench, checking to make sure that he didn't hit his head.

He took the violin in his arms and walked the twenty yards to the edge of the cliff—there was a fence there, made of stone and about five feet high—but other than that, it was a steep cliff all the way to the crashing ocean below.

He held the instrument and debated tossing it over—an absolute freedom, a final goodbye.

But—but maybe Sniff would have wanted him to have it. Maybe one day, if he were older, if he *lived* long enough, he would play the violin for his children and his children's children, and he would tell them the tale of the girl that had given her life to save hundreds. Maybe when he was older, he would look back on it with fondness—though the sadness would never be gone; as Phil said, he would only learn to shoulder it.

He hadn't even known her that long. Hadn't known her long enough to celebrate a birthday with her—not even a half-birthday, and yet...her death caused him pain. Not just mental pain—but the physical pain, the pain that wanted him to go to Niki and ask if he was having a heart attack kind of pain.

He knew better by now that the symptoms of loss and grief were not just mentally taxing. He knew that his heart would burn and hurt and ache, and his stomach would roil, and he would eat less food than usual—not that he ate much anyway, though he would never waste his food—habits from Pogtopia, he mused.

Sniff was gone.

The Elytrian girl with the fun laugh and the short hair and the sky blue eyes was gone, and she wasn't coming back—and Tommy *knew* that, knew that in his very *soul*...but some part of him whispered that—maybe it wasn't too late.

It was, but the stupid part of him thought that they still had a chance. The stupid part of him still thrived, deep in his brain, and he hated it with everything in him—he shoved the optimism down and wanted to rot.

Tommy took a small breath and sat down on the concrete wall, his legs dangling into space. It wasn't anything like the time on the Golden Gate Bridge—his death wish was, as usual, temporarily gone. It would come back, though. Eventually. It always did when the bad things happened. When the bad things happened, his head wanted him to die and not have to deal with it—to not have others deal with *him*.

If not for himself, for Sniff's Final Flight—for her funeral that her parents were so painstakingly preparing. Tommy couldn't imagine ever preparing a funeral.

He laughed, then. Quietly, on the edge of a cliff that led to death—a path that he did not wish to step down at this moment—he *laughed*. He looked in the face of mortality and smiled because he realized—he realized that in the seven years of horror and anguish and loss and solitude—he, Tommy Innes, had never been to a funeral.

He laughed because he had lost so much and gained so little and lost some more.

The only funeral he had ever attended had been that of his mother, when he was very young. He couldn't remember it—so did it count, really? He only remembered flashes of the hard years afterward—of his father staring at pictures of his mother (he had her eyes, he was told so many times) and Puffy coming to get him, leading him away with cloudy sadness and whispers that his father would be okay one day.

He was, months and months later. He wasn't forever okay—Tommy supposed he never was, to the bitter end—but he was well enough to continue Tommy's training from where Puffy had taken over for the brief time.

Tommy closed his eyes, his laughter dying in his chest as he clutched Sniff's possession to his chest and let the mood swing overtake him, relishing the tears that rolled down his face and fell upon his school uniform.

Sniff was gone, and he would never see her again.

Grass crunched behind him, and Tommy glanced slightly to the side to see Wilbur standing there, brown-haired and wide-eyed and half in his Phantom form. Tubbo was upright, his hand flung out, eyes wary, pausing the Phantom in his hands.

Of course, Tommy thought bitterly. They had probably seen him wander just a bit too close to the cliff and had sent Wilbur down to—what? Stop him from jumping?

They couldn't stop him if he tried, and some part of him reveled in that rebellious notion. Of course, it was dismissed after an actual thought, and Tommy slammed *that* particular door closed. Wilbur hovered, unsure if he should run over and save Tommy from what he probably thought was happening. Fortunately, Tubbo knew better and walked over, settling down on Tommy's other side, glancing down at the violin that he clasped to his chest with his right hand. The Shulker smiled at him, eyes shining from where the starlight shone off the waves, and clasped his other hand, warm and friendly and full of love.

Tommy squeezed his hand back and felt Wilbur settle on his other side, the trio turning their attention towards the horizon.

It was far past midnight, he realized, for the sliver of a moon was now on their side of the sky—perhaps he should shoot Ranboo or Niki or Phil a quick message saying that he would be back eventually.

That was a problem for a later Tommy, and a later Tommy was not now. Tommy sighed as he felt a hand run fondly through his hair, resting his head against Wil's shoulder. He could almost feel the phantom smiling and was glad neither of his friends tried to relinquish his grip of the violin—he was afraid if he were to let go, it would vanish, or would splinter across the wave-crushed rocks below.

It was silly to keep little things like this. To keep reminders of someone that he would protect with his life—last remnants of a person that was never meant to be.

It was his last connection to Sniff, save for a feather that would be lost far sooner than an instrument, and that was why Tommy feared it.

One day, whether he liked it or not, it would be gone. Whether it would be destroyed by a person, or a fire or an earthquake—he did not know. Whether it would be stolen or lost or forgotten, he did not know. But it would be, one day, and he would lose Sniff again. He would lose the only piece that he had of her—and consequently, he would feel all over again.

He supposed it was why he had never kept any of his parent's things. Not that he'd gotten the chance to keep anything but the memories and a few passwords to Clementine's journals that he had turned into the Vice-Admiral, who had thanked him and deciphered a bunch of messages for missions never turned in and planets discovered. The videos he kept close to his heart—perhaps he would open them, perhaps he wouldn't. The videos and the holograms were his and his alone, and even the string of code that his father had given him—they were still being deciphered by a team, and sometimes Tommy got message updates on where his ship had traveled—was the only thing given out.

Clementine kept her secrets, and these ones were more personal than those of the Children's Rebellion or the *H.M.S Fran*; these ones *were* his—Bad had told him these were okay secrets because they weren't *really* secrets.

Sometimes you had to die a little inside in order to be reborn and rise as a stronger and wiser version of yourself.

He wondered how many times he had been reborn; how many times he had died inside. How many chalk marks in his head had been mentally marked, counting, counting, counting...

If he would ever run out of chalk.

It's just limestone; he chastised himself. Run out? Make some more. It's microscopic plankton. Can't be that hard to find.

He smiled into the shoulder of his friend and fell asleep listening to the waves crash against the rocks, the violin of a dead girl still clutched tightly in one hand, the palm of another in his right.

Somewhere around him, someone began to sing a lullaby.

Chapter End Notes

That was four thousand words of no dialogue.

Ha. Ha.

In other news, this is the song that Tommy played at the concert: [youtube link](#) if you want to hear it

Stars and Shit

Chapter Notes

yeah, yeah, I'm a nerd, I GET IT (also yeah I know that constellations change over time but I'm too lazy to make up new onessss)

*We are all of us stars,
and we deserve to twinkle.*
- Marilyn Monroe

Tommy was shoving things into his suitcase when Wilbur waltzed in, the Phantom adjusting his beanie before speaking up.

"Packing?"

"No," he said. "I'm doing drugs." Tommy sat down on his heels and turned to see Wilbur rolling his eyes. "If you keep doing that, your eyes are going to get stuck."

"That's a myth," Wilbur told him shortly.

"Aunt Puffy would never lie to me." *Well, you know, besides telling me that she and Dad would be along shortly.*

"She probably also told you Santa and the Easter Bunny were real."

"Who is Santa?" Tommy asked Wilbur, who gasped, clearly exaggerating.

"You don't know who *Santa* is?" the Phantom said in a near-shriek. "The guy from the North pole who goes down your chimney?!"

"...I was born on a spaceship, Wil," Tommy said warily, tossing a red and white shirt into the suitcase he was packing for Elytra. "There isn't a North pole, and nor are there chimneys."

Wilbur paused. "Fair point," he said eventually, sitting down on Tommy's bed. "Did I ever thank you for rescuing me seven years ago, Tommy?"

He paused, sitting back on his heels as he thought about it. "I don't remember," he said honestly, thinking of the whirlwind of the last few weeks. "It wasn't much of a rescue, though. Seeing as—well, you know, I was stuck in the Wasteland too."

"You were ten."

"So?" he said, raising an eyebrow.

"You were *ten*," Wilbur repeated, eyebrows furrowing. "You'd just lost your family—" Tommy winced slightly. "—and I never even caught your name before you hacked into the system." He threw up his hands. "Why didn't you escape with me? You could have met us all far sooner." He sounded a tad bitter.

Tommy pursed his lips. "Well, I *was* young," he said. "I didn't think I had anywhere to go. And after the Red Planet—well, I just wanted a stable food source."

"Even though they experimented on you?" the Phantom asked quietly.

"I suppose so," he said slowly. "It's...well, it wasn't torture, Wil." He cracked a small smile. Wilbur didn't look that amused. Or like he believed Tommy at all. "Not really. Sure, I can't sleep except in space and in high places—but the Vice-Admiral was very accommodating. I got a high dorm!" He snorted. "Not like I sleep there anymore anyway."

"They still experimented on a *child*."

"I wasn't a child after Pogtopia," he said quietly. "I don't think any of us were."

"You may have been through a lot, but you were, and still *are*, a minor, according to galactic laws," Wilbur corrected. "You're damn well lucky that nobody was recording that Golden Gate Bridge at that time. Otherwise, the media would hound after you like they do Ranboo and Purpled—thankfully, they're also minors, so they have *some* privacy." Tommy bit his lip until it drew blood, and Wilbur bent over and flicked his nose until he stopped. "I don't understand why you didn't escape."

"I *told* you," he said. "I had a stable food source there." He shrugged. "Pogtopia—the Red Planet—it was...it was a whole other can of beans, as my aunt used to say. It made me—it *gave* me things that I wish I didn't have; techniques I now use—I don't hoard food, though I know Purpled did. I didn't really have the opportunity to hoard food in the Wasteland."

"It was really sad," Wilbur said quietly. "That—Ponk and Punz saw the distress signal and freaked because they had sent their little brother to a genocide, and when we got there it was so much *worse*, Tommy, so much worse than we had *imagined*—"

"The grass was brown," he continued, when Wilbur's breathing hitch and he looked away—as if Tommy could not see the tears in his eyes. "The plants were dead. Flies littered the ground. If you looked closely, you could see bodies in the alleys—bodies of children." Tommy shook his head, hands shaking. "Sometimes, I still hear gunshots."

"Mass graves," Wilbur said. "Hundreds upon hundreds of kids—*gone*, and I think I remember the life draining from Ponk or Punz as they beheld the horror that had gone on in a place they had *thought* was safe—and then Ranboo and Purpled were standing there, alive...and it turned out, we thought they were the only ones." He rubbed his face. "Phil—Phil was new—less than a year made captain—and...to this *day*, I think that is the worst mission we've ever done. We had to call in Command to send reporters and people who would—who would bury the children, and Techno and Phil and I took on the duty of finding and naming all three thousand, two hundred, and seventy-three children that had once lived in Pogtopia."

"Purpled said he visited it, once," Tommy mentioned. "After."

"Yes," Wilbur said. "He told us it was a vacation and then decided to visit the burial site—of his friends. Of you, I suppose."

It was odd, trying to imagine that he had a grave there. That—that somewhere out there, in the rows upon rows of graves—his name, one of his fake ones, just like the mural on the *L'manburg*—existed on a small stone without a body to be found.

"The Red Planet's Genocide is one of the worst tragedies in history," Tommy said eventually. "Seeing it—listening to what Lani and Drista said about them learning about it in Survival Strategies—" he threw up his hands. "It's a school subject, Wilbur, it's *history*, and it's something that I lived through." Wilbur frowned at him, confused. "It was—what, two years ago? Only *two*. I was fifteen, and I think—I don't know, Purpled and Ranboo were around the same age, maybe a bit older. And yet—and yet now I have to learn about it in a *class*?" Tommy shook his head. "It was—it's too recent to talk about that. To make it seem as if it happened too *long* ago."

"I think that's the point of Survival Strategies," Wilbur said, though he seemed to understand. "To talk about it just in case—"

"Just in case you're put in a situation with three thousand other children and forced to find food in a dwindling wilderness?" Tommy asked, raising an eyebrow. "All while guards hunt you down and make you watch the executions of your friends?"

"No," Wilbur corrected lightly. "So you can adapt to a situation in case of a dangerous circumstance—so that if you are on a planet with no life and nothing, you can *live*. They teach us about the extremities because they are examples—examples of the worst of the worst to prevent the *happening* of things like that. There are not many things worse than that situation, Tommy. And guess what—you and Ranboo and Purpled *survived* it."

"Luck," he said, gritting his teeth. "Nothing more."

"I don't think so," Wilbur said kindly. "Purpled said the same thing a long time ago. I think that you guys have heart and tenacity and knowledge." He reached forward and put his hand on Tommy's head, and he shoved Wilbur's hand off with a small snort. The Phantom rolled his eyes in response. "*You* created the Children's Rebellion, Tommy."

"We didn't do anything. It wasn't much of a Rebellion."

"And yet..." Wilbur paused. "What was her name? The Feline?"

"Alyssa," he said patiently, thinking of her many hours and patience trying to teach him an instrument he had never before touched.

"Her, yes," Wilbur continued. "Her murals—her words are still on the walls to this day. You know as well as I do that they inspired children—"

"—we *killed* them," he said.

"They chose to raise their hands and give that sign."

"I planted that stupid fucking idea into their heads."

"Without you, they would have *starved*, Tommy!" Wilbur said, throwing up his hands. "They would have died anyway! They raided three warehouses while you were away—you didn't know that, did you?"

"...no," he said weakly, valiantly, wishing that the wetness on his face was just a stupid dream.

"We had to look over the diaries they held," Wilbur said carefully, blinking at him. "They would have starved, the older ones. They gave the food to the younger ones. So in the end—had they not followed Alyssa's advice on rebellion—they would have died of starvation." The Phantom sighed, fingers twitching. "I think everyone would rather die resisting than in a corner, weakening from lack of food." His throat was too dry. He could not breathe. "I think—Tommy?"

He could not breathe.

"Hey, hey," someone crooned, and Tommy let out a panting breath, his lungs refusing to work—or maybe that was his stubbornness. "Toms, I need you to breathe for me, alright? Inhale for a count of four—now."

Tommy gulped air like a drowning man, feeling Wilbur's hands on his. His vision flashed, grey to black to white to blurriness.

"Hold for seven," Wilbur coaxed him, his hands blisteringly warm against Tommy's icy fingers. But—he couldn't let *go*, didn't want to let go. "Good. It's okay. You're okay. We're—we're on the *L'manburg*. You're safe. Exhale for eight seconds. There you go. You got it."

Tommy blinked and saw brown eyes swimming in front of him. He licked his lips blearily, trying to get the dryness out of his throat. "Hmm?"

"Hey," Wilbur said, smiling at him. He was kneeling in front of Tommy, now. When had he got there? "You're back."

"Was I gone?" he asked.

"Not in the literal sense," Wilbur said carefully. "Do you—"

"—freak out often?" He snorted, withdrawing his hands from Wilbur's grip. Everything seemed colder, even though the temperature gauge read seventy-one degrees. "No. Maybe."

"I was going to say had a panic attack, or something akin to it," the Phantom corrected lightly.

"It's not a panic attack if I'm not panicking, innit?" he laughed.

"You *were* panicking, and...that's really not how that works."

"No, no," he said. "I think it is."

"I think you're a delusional little gremlin."

Tommy rolled his eyes, still feeling slightly shaky as he raised the pitch of his voice. "Meh meh meh meh, my name is Wilbur and I am a bitch."

"What the *fuck*," the Phantom deadpanned. "I do not sound like that."

"You do," he said, grinning broadly. "You really, really do."

"I—are you okay, Tommy?" Wilbur asked him.

Tommy paused, blinking. Hmm. People didn't ask him that very often. People that did were bitches or just being polite and didn't actually care. "Yep."

"That's not very believable."

"You're getting senile, old man," he said, trying to laugh it off. "I am perfectly fine."

"Tommy, I literally had to walk you through breathing."

"Breathing's hard, innit?"

"Uh...no," Wilbur said. "Breathing is actually a normal function. Intaking oxygen?"

"Difficult," he said.

"You come out of the womb able to do a few things," Wilbur said, crossing his legs and raising an eyebrow. "Cry, shit, and breathe."

"Some people have asthma," he said, crossing his arms. "Like Dream."

Wilbur paused. "...Dream does not have asthma," he said carefully. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Um...there's this girl in my Human History class," Tommy said. "She has a tea kettle laugh as well. And she has an inhaler." He shrugged. "Sorry, I sort of just assumed."

"Nah," Wilbur said, chuckling a bit. "I...actually have something to show you." He sat up, glancing down at the half-packed suitcase. "On the surface."

"Oh, I'm allowed to leave?" he asked dryly.

"I mean, *I'm* here," Wilbur said.

Fat load of good you did last time, he said to himself, biting his lip until he drew blood. Wilbur reached up and flicked his forehead again.

"Stop doing that, child," the Phantom said, and Tommy rolled his eyes. "Come on. Let's go."

"But—" he started weakly. "I have packing and shit."

"You can do that later."

"You are not a very good influence," he decided, standing up and grabbing Wilbur's hand, the Phantom hauling him up. "We're literally leaving at 0600 tomorrow." He glanced sadly at his unfinished suitcase, messy and unfolded clothes that Phil had bought him spilling out and onto the floor.

"That's in like...seven hours," Wilbur snorted, dragging him out the door. "Plenty of time."

"...how the fuck am I supposed to get the recommended amount of sleep?" he demanded as Wilbur walked them down the hallway.

"Oh please," the Phantom snorted, adjusting his unruly hair under his red beanie of the day. "Don't tell me you were going to sleep."

"Okay, fine," he grumbled.

"Exactly!" Wilbur crowed victoriously.

"What are we even gonna do on the surface anyway?" he pointed out dubiously. "All the Tesco's are closed."

"They're called Walmarts in the Americas," Wilbur supplied helpfully.

"Shut the fuck up," he said.

"Why do you even call it Tesco? You've never been to England!"

He paused, shoving his hands in his pockets before continuing. "I dunno. It sounds cooler."

"You're such a child."

"Wow, you really have no other insult, do you?" he commented.

Wilbur stuck out his tongue at him as they reached the door that led them to the space station, saluting Sappnap, who eyed Tommy warily before nodding and letting them pass. Tommy flipped him off expertly, and the Blazeborn mirrored the move before resting his head against the wall and closing his eyes.

As they took an automated shuttle down to Earth, Tommy watched the tiny vehicles that moved back and forth from the space station to the *L'manburg*, fixing it up. It mainly was the outside that was broken now—the inside had been fixed first, which was why the *L'manburg* had been able to

fly to the *U.S.S Midway* at the Vice-Admiral's direction. He pressed a hand to the window and noted the coolness that touched his hands.

"We're not in San Francisco," he noted once they had landed and gotten off into the darkness. They were at a small stop near the mountains, twinkling lights of a city miles off.

"Nah," Wilbur said, and Tommy grumbled as the man took off his coat and threw it at him. "Should have told you to bring a coat." He led Tommy away from the station, the Avian watching as the transport took off back to the stars.

Speaking of the stars...

"They're pretty," he noted.

Say hello to the stars for me, Tommy.

He winced as Wilbur lay down in the grass, curiously following the Phantom's lead. "The fuck are we doing here, Wil?"

"Look," Wilbur said, the bright stars reflecting in his eyes as he pointed up at the swaths of the milky way, at one of the constellations that Tommy did not know. "It's Orion."

He squinted, trying to see the star—or constellation, really—that the Phantom was talking about. After a moment, Wilbur took his hand and pointed it towards three stars in a line.

"See?" the Phantom said. "That's Orion's belt. And there—the bow. And the sword!"

Tommy hummed as he noted it. "Isn't Orion a guy from the greek myths?"

"You'll have to ask Techno about why it's called that," Wilbur said. "I've never been one for mythology." He heaved a small sigh. Look—the one to the left of the bow, there." Tommy squinted and thought maybe he saw it against the bright splash of white and purple and blue in the sky. The

stars were so much more apparent than in San Francisco, though he supposed that was because of light pollution. "That's Betelgeuse. It's the tenth brightest star in the night sky. It's also nine-hundred and fifty times the size of Sol." Tommy made a slight questioning sound as he curled up in Wilbur's too-large jacket, the grass cold under his arms. "That's what Terrans call the Sun."

"That's really big..." he mused.

"Yep," Wilbur replied brightly. "It's four thousand degrees cooler than Sol, though. The Phantom let out a small breath. "Six hundred and forty-two light-years away, and only about ten point zero-seven million years old. Which is young, compared to Sol—four point six billion years."

"As fascinating as this is," Tommy started. "Why are you telling me about—about, um, Beetlejuice?"

"Betelgeuse," Wilbur corrected once he had recovered from a coughing fit that hid laughter. "Not Beetlejuice."

"You just said the same words."

"No, there's a slight difference," Wilbur corrected. "The Terran scientific name is Alpha Orionis, I suppose. I prefer Betelgeuse."

"I don't," he grumbled.

"Anyway," Wilbur continued. "That's the supergiant that Elytra revolves around."

Tommy paused. "I thought that the Elytrian sun was called S'tel'ahyr," he said.

"That's what the Elytrians called it," Wilbur said. "Do you know anything about Avia?"

Tommy frowned. "No," he said. "I mean, I suppose it was abandoned—"

"Not abandoned," Wilbur corrected. "Destroyed."

Tommy felt his jaw drop. Well, his father and aunt had never told him *that*. "Wha—planets can't just be destroyed." Puffy had said it was *uninhabitable*, not that it was gone.

"Yes, they can," Wilbur said. "It was an asteroid, purposely directed. It should never have hit Avia. That's why so few survived...not to mention that most with Avian blood are either half or quarterlings."

His eye twitched. "Well, I knew it was a sister planet to Elytra—a bit closer to S'tel'ahyr, though. I thought it got destroyed by an atom bomb."

"No," Wilbur said. "It was...it doesn't exist anymore."

"Wow, that must have been a huge fucking asteroid."

"No," Wilbur said again. "Avia is smaller than Mars. Elytra is roughly the same size—eight-ninths, I think, compared to Terra. So while Elytrians got wings and can fly on most other planets that aren't too large, Avia got such a high jump height that Avians learned how to control air. They didn't need wings."

"So...on other planets, because of the gravity, we can only glide," Tommy said.

"Yes. I'm surprised you didn't know that."

"Well, I mean, my mom died when I was little, and Puffy wasn't Avian, and my dad died when I was ten..." Tommy trailed off. "I'm sure they would have taught me that eventually. Ten-year-olds don't exactly get science very much." He hesitated. "Chroma didn't teach me anything about Avians."

"I keep forgetting that Chroma—that rat bastard—is an Avian," Wilbur muttered.

"I used to think we were the only ones left," Tommy said amicably, tracing the patterns of stars with his eyes. "Just me and him, y'know? He did things to my head. Messed it up. Made me think he was a good guy, even when it hurt." Wilbur's breathing choked a bit before continuing normally, and Tommy pretended it didn't notice that. "Grian—the Elytrian in the Children's Rebellion, I dunno if Purpled told you 'bout him, he told me that it wasn't right, what Chroma was doing. It—well, it made me start to think, and then, in the end, he—well, my head hurt, and I realized that Chroma wasn't a very good guy."

"No," Wilbur mused softly. "He wasn't, was he?"

"Nah," Tommy said, choking back horrified laughter at the easiness in which he was able to say the other Avian's name. He remembered a time, not too long ago, where it had hurt to even think about it. "Bitch," he added, almost in afterthought. "Anyway, why was an asteroid headed towards Avia?"

"Dunno," Wilbur said. "It just...*was*. We think it's the Arachnids. They've never owned up to it."

"How does one direct an entire asteroid?" Tommy asked.

"Don't ask me," Wilbur snorted.

"You don't know much, do you?"

"Shut up, gremlin," the Phantom said fondly, poking him in the cheek. Tommy grumbled and pushed his hand away, missing the warmth. "I know more than you because I'm older."

"You have aged poorly and swiftly," Tommy told him.

Wilbur laughed then, and Tommy smiled because he was happy—and also because he was incredibly funny and humorous and just amazing in general. "Anyway," the Phantom said after he subsided in his high-pitched laughter that somehow Tommy found comforting. "They weren't close after the initial impact—like, the planets, I mean; Elytra and Avia. But—it was just a bunch of asteroids and shit floating around where Avia used to be. They sent ships out, of course. There—there wasn't anything." Tommy tried to imagine it—the remains of a planet, rock, turned to nothing.

No life. "By the time Elytra came around to where the remains of Avia was, they'd built a planetary shield. And—you know Saturn? Rings made of ice-rock. Elytra has rings too. They're the remains of Avia. The planetary shield stays up because rocks bombard the surface. It's loud and blinding and annoying, Phil told me. But I don't think anyone has the heart to get rid of the only thing left of Avia."

Saturn, Tommy thought, thinking of the gas giant. Life planets did not have rings—for if there were rings, then rocks would bombard the surface, and there would be no life. He tried to imagine an Earth-like blue and green planet with Saturn's rings around it.

"Is it pretty?" he asked eventually, thinking of the billions of people that died. Nothing remained of them now.

"Phil said it was beautiful," Wilbur said. "I've only seen pictures. I suppose...tomorrow I'll get to see it for the first time. It's a bit thinner than Saturn's rings because Avia was smaller...but I think it's nice, that the Elytrian government never destroyed the rocks. That they let the remains of their sister planet lived."

"That's...billions, dead," Tommy whispered, staring up at Betelgeuse, squinting at the red star in the millions of others.

"That's why so few remain," Wilbur murmured. "Why they stay hidden, I don't know. I think the Arachnids are after them."

"But why?" Tommy asked, turning his head to glance at the Phantom, who stared at the stars with chocolate brown eyes and a saddened, faraway look. "Avians aren't—aren't *extremely* powerful."

"I mean, you guys sort of are," Wilbur said.

"No," Tommy said. "Not...not all of us can do the fast-run thing. Or the...you know, when I stopped the Arachnid's hearts? I've always been able to do it...way too much, actually. Which explains the consistent heart attacks."

"Oh," Wilbur said. "So you're like... the main character. A Mary Sue?"

"Um, no," Tommy snorted. "I have many, many flaws. I can't do *everything*, Wil." He shook his head. "Like beat Technoblade in chess."

"*Nobody* can beat Techno in chess," Wilbur said, partially amused. "He's like—a God at chess." The Phantom paused. "And fencing. And being smart."

"We get it; Technoblade is great," Tommy grumbled. "Technoblade never dies. Blah blah blah."

He could almost *hear* Wilbur's smirk as the two fell silent. Of course, that quietness didn't last very long.

"Do you know any Terran constellations, Tommy?" the Phantom asked.

"Hmm?" he hummed. "Uh—Orion."

"That doesn't count; I just told you."

He rolled his eyes. "I still know it, bitch."

"Okay, do you know any *other* ones?"

Tommy tilted his head, thinking. "Nope," he said, popping the p.

"Well," Wilbur said. "There's a lot of 'em."

"There's a lot of fucking stars."

"True," Wilbur said. "Anyway, near Orion, you have Monoceros—that's a unicorn, by the way—"

"Horned bitch," Tommy snorted.

"—and below Orion, you have Lepus, and sorta above it you have Taurus—"

"That's a Star Sign!" Tommy said excitedly. "I'm an Aries!" He sighed. "Lani told me that. Yo, Wilbur, do you think that all Star Signs have the same personas? Lani read me my horoscope today. Something about being honest and tender." He snorted. "Whatever the fuck that means."

"I think Star Signs are bullshit," Wilbur said, without batting an eye. "And anything that uses them as a sorting hat—yes, from Harry Potter—"

"Never seen it."

"—are dickheads," the Phantom finished. "Also, you have to watch Harry Potter. Or read it. It's a classic."

"So...what Star Sign are you?"

"Virgo," Wilbur sighed eventually. "People who sort other people by Star Signs should go fucking die."

"That's...harsh," Tommy said. "Isn't there a book like that? Where they get sorted into their Star Signs? I think it's based on the Hunger Games or something." He snorted softly. "I've watched part of the Hunger Games."

"I bet it's a fucking stupid ass book."

Tommy reached over and slapped Wilbur. "You can't say that!"

"Freedom of speech."

"I'll show *you* freedom of speech—!"

Wilbur pushed his head away with a snort. "Anyway," the Phantom said, as Tommy subsided from trying to punch him in the side. "Look, if you see *there*—" He pointed at another patch in the sky, tracing a line that Tommy had to squint to see. "You'll see Ursa Major, also known as the Great Bear—and the backside of it, the tail, is the Big Dipper."

"I'll dip you."

"What does that even mean—never mind," Wilbur sighed. "Anyway, if you follow the edge of the spoon—'cause that's what it is, a spoon—to the little dipper, the first star on the handle of the Little Dipper is the North Star."

"The North Star," Tommy repeated dubiously.

"Or Polaris, yes," Wilbur nodded. "The brightest star of the constellation Ursa Minor, and also extremely close to the north celestial pole and is basically a fixed point in the sky. Of course, we don't use it anymore, but the Humans of Terra used to use it for navigation before they had compasses and all that shit."

He couldn't imagine a time without technology. Of course, that had been long ago.

"It's actually a triple star system," Wilbur continued. "Polaris is two-thousand times brighter than Sol, see, but its companion is a main-sequence star, which actually is about ninety percent of stars in the universe." Wilbur paused. "I'm surprised you haven't stopped me yet."

"No," Tommy said, smiling as he took in a deep breath of clear air. "You're clearly interested in astrology."

Wilbur's eye twitched. "It's astronomy, prick. Astrology is a pseudoscience that claims divine information about shit based on celestial objects."

"Whatever."

"Anyway, its companions, which are significantly smaller, and which is why they were discovered later, around two-thousand and six, common era, Earth years, are Polaris Ab and Polaris B. Wait, no, Polaris B was discovered in the seventeen hundreds, *fuck*—it was the fact that it was a triple star system that was discovered in two thousand six." Wilbur sounded annoyed at himself. "Polaris Ab is really small compared to Polaris A—the North Star—and only rotates two billion miles, or three-point one billion meters, around the North Star."

"That's...really far," Tommy mentioned.

"Not compared in relative scale to the universe," Wilbur shrugged. "I mean, Polaris itself is four hundred and thirty-four light-years from Earth."

Tommy inhaled sharply. One light-year was about six trillion miles. That was... exceptionally far. "Are there planets rotating 'round Polaris?"

Wilbur's eyes were gleaming as Tommy looked at him. "Of course. Where do you think the Blazeborns originated from? They have three suns and live on a magma planet. It was almost like they were born to be fire."

Tommy hummed and wished that he'd taken astronomy. "Hey, Wil—I thought you were the Chief Communications Officer. Why aren't you the navigator if you know so much shit about the stars? Why is Technoblade the navigator?"

"I learned this *from* Techno," Wilbur admitted. "I never took astronomy in Fleet school. Technoblade is just a huge nerd."

Tommy closed his eyes and imagined the pink-haired half-Piglin ranting to Wilbur about the stars and the miles between them and the outliers. A smile tugged at his lips.

"Thank you, Tommy," Wilbur said, and Tommy's eyes shot open in surprise. "Thank you for rescuing me."

The stars shone brighter than they ever had.

Flightless Chickens

"I'll remember you, though.

I remember everyone that leaves."

- Lilo & Stitch

There were fourteen of them that filed onto the transport to Elytria.

Himself, of course. He and the other teenagers of the *L'manburg*—Tubbo, Purpled, Ranboo, Lani, and Drista. Then there was Philza and Kristin, Wilbur and Techno—he had literally no idea why Technoblade was there, but he also wasn't going to ask—Niki, because she was Tubbo and Lani's guardian, Dream, because he was his sister's stand-in guardian while they were away, and Hannah, who was also temporarily acting as both Ranboo and Purpled's guardians; as neither Ponk nor Punz could come due to work. He knew that Hannah was only there because she was Elytrian, and she looked mildly uncomfortable, as she'd never actually met Sniff; merely seen her in passing.

They were solemn—although he bet that Sniff would have told him not to be. He leaned his head against the back of the seat, and he squeezed his eyes shut, and he tried not to imagine her laughter as she ran.

He was going to say goodbye today. Again and again.

A hand snaked its way into his, and he glanced over to see Tubbo staring at him, his jaw locked stubbornly, his own eyes watery and bright golden brown in the light of the warped starlight. And—Tubbo didn't say anything, but he doesn't need to, and Tommy took a small breath and closed his eyes, annoyance flooding through him as the tears started.

They weren't even near Elytra. Or its star, Betelgeuse. They were—they were—how long had they been aboard the transport?

His palms were sweaty, but poor Tubbo didn't let go.

"Phil," he said, breaking the—hours?—of silence with one word. The Elytrian in question looked over him from where he was sitting with Hannah and Kristin in one of the backless chairs. "What are Final Flights like?"

"I forgot you wouldn't know," Phil said, blinking his blue eyes at him. "It's a tradition, among Elytrians, for their closest friends and family to fly to their funeral among a path they loved. It signifies—I believe it signifies people entering their lives, just as those have left it."

"It should be the opposite," Hannah said softly, deep brown eyes filled with sadness. "Parents should not have to bury their children."

"They taught us in Advanced Interspecies Protocol of the Elytrians that it purported a journey to a new place," Kristin spoke up. "Like...whatever is beyond, I suppose." Her husband nodded thoughtfully, and a slight relief entered Kristin's face; as if she had been afraid of making the Elytrians aboard the transport angry.

"Wait, but I don't have wings," Lani said.

"Yeah, that happens," Phil said, smiling sadly. "During the Final Flight, you are not allowed to flap your wings—unless you need to, of course, but *culturally*, it has something to do with seeing a journey to its end without any stresses along the way."

"Well, that's bullshit," Tommy snorted. "Mountains and valleys make up a story."

"You guys get special glider suits," Hannah said. Phil frowned at her. "I—I've been to one of them. My older sister died." She shrugged slightly, glancing out the window. "She had a Merling significant other. They were given a wingsuit."

"...and the Galactic Rebellion doesn't know about this?" Wilbur asked, interested.

"I mean, it's just a fancy bunch of fabric that allows you to drift in the wind," Hannah pointed out. "It's been made before. These are usually government property, though. And old."

"I am sorry for your loss," Phil said respectfully. "If I had known then I would not have invited you."

"Nah," Hannah said. "It's fine. It was—four years ago, I think, come next month. I'm not going to get flashbacks from a planet that I left behind."

"Yeah, unlike three people on this ship," Techno muttered. Purpled, Ranboo, and Tommy all turned to look at him. "You heard nothin', nerds."

"Uh-huh," Purpled said. "What about the rest of us—since, you know, it'll only be Lani, Drista, and Tommy from this transport who're gonna fly?"

"We'll be at the burial grounds with probably a bunch of family friends," Phil said, a sad smile crossing his face.

"Sniff didn't have any friends on Elytra," Tommy spoke up. Just about everyone turned to look at him. "What?! I'm not being rude! That's what she *said*!"

"So then it'll just be the five of you," Phil pointed out helpfully.

"Oh, great," Tommy said. "Lani, Drista, me, and two adults. That'll go great. I've never flown before."

"Couldn't you push up the air under your wingsuit—if it's not a jetpack—and raise yourself higher?" Tubbo said thoughtfully.

Tommy blinked. "Huh. Never thought of that."

"That's why I exist."

"Hello," Drista said lamely. "Human here."

"They'll shorten the flight," Hannah assured her. Drista frowned. "Look, if Sniff didn't want you to be on her Final Flight, she would not have written you down in her book."

Tommy didn't move towards his side pocket—where a phaser should have lain, but instead, a golden feather lay cold against his thigh, wrapped in layers of cloth. "It's fine, Drista," he said. "Nobody will hate you for not having wings. That's not really how the world works."

"I'm Human."

"Yeah, nobody's gonna hate you unless you're an Arachnid," Tubbo pointed out, and *maybe* that was a tad racist, but Tommy had never met an Arachnid that was on his side, so he didn't say anything.

Elytra was beautiful.

That was the understatement of a century, and he realized why Phil spoke of it with a quirked smile and a far-off look on his face.

It was much like Earth in the way that it was made up of green and blue colors, though the red sun in the background was more prominent than any star that Tommy had ever seen.

There was a slight shimmer of pink on the surface that Tommy knew was the shields protecting it from the rings of rock that circled it. Some part of him knew that those rocks were all that remained of his ancestors. That that was *his* planet that he was looking at—what remained of it anyway; shining red and orange in the scarlet light of a burning star.

He and everyone else who had never seen Elytra was struck dumb by the sheer anomaly that was Elytra—scientifically, the life on the planet, complete with the rings of rock, *should not exist*. But because the life below had created shields—hence the white-tinged-pink shields—it was possible for such a thing to exist.

"It's beautiful," he whispered, pressing a hand up against the window as he stared at the approaching planet.

"It's Elytra," Phil replied in the background. "Even before the destruction of Avia, it was a sight to see. Now it is a sad beauty in the emptiness of space."

"Old man," Wilbur jabbed, breaking the tension as he elbowed Phil in the ribs. "Getting poetic now, are we?"

"Oh, shut up," Phil replied. "I'll make you clean the bathrooms instead of that robot."

"Thanks," Purpled said. "I had to do that once. It sucked."

"Me too," Tubbo said, shuddering.

"Been there, done that," Ranboo said.

"Yep." That was Lani.

"Fuck that shit," Drista said.

Tommy looked at them and then at Phil. "You make the kids clean the toilets when they misbehave?"

"No," Phil said. "I make the adults do it too." Beside Phil, Hannah nodded vigorously. Perhaps there was a bit of trauma behind her brown eyes. He wouldn't know. He didn't know anything about trauma. At all. Nothing.

"I haven't," Technoblade said smugly.

"You're a fucking prick, that's why," Wilbur told him.

"Techno, Wilbur," Phil snapped. "Not now. Please." The two subsided into sullen silence, and Tommy returned his attention to the window. As the ship headed towards the surface, Tommy saw them pause outside the shields to get a gateway. Far off in the distance, he saw a rock hit the shields, wincing as it exploded in an eruption of rock. A small gateway opened and the transport passed through to the planet below.

The architecture of the Elytrians was vastly different from Terra or the Arachnids. There was a lot of open space and very few pathways, though Phil said that was because most people flew everywhere. Instead of grand cities like San Francisco made of boxes and metal, the Elytrians had a lot of greenery and hanging devices made from hovercrafts. Tommy stared in awe as he observed the shadows of Elytrians pass overhead, going to work or playing around or even just going to the store. He was amazed that not a single one of them crashed.

Two very familiar Elytrians met them at the dock, one with dark green wings that reminded Tommy of evergreen trees and leaves from the midsummer trees, and the other with neat pale wings that looked like snowfall. Both of them wore neat tanned robes that Tommy had only seen Phil wear once—at his hearing after he'd disobeyed every individual Galactic Rebellion jurisdiction ever to exist while simultaneously saving the lives of every single person on the *L'manburg*. Although, to be fair, Phil's robes were green and not tan.

"Uh—hi," he said. "Mrs—Ms—um—Ms. Ch'lse'ae and um...Mr. H'kaly'pi."

"Smooth," Wilbur murmured from his position by Tommy's shoulder, his face arranged carefully neutral. Tommy elbowed him, and the Phantom coughed loudly. "Sorry," Wilbur said, when everyone looked at him. "I got something stuck in my throat."

Ch'lse'ae looked vaguely amused as she nodded at Tommy. "It is nice to meet you in person, Mr. Innes," she returned, her expression saddening. "Though I do wish it was under better circumstances."

"Likewise," he whispered, his mouth suddenly feeling unbearably dry.

"Come," H'kaly'pi said. "We must meet the others at the Ponyo mountains."

"What—*now*?" Purpled asked.

"I don't know if you knew this," Ch'lse'ae said. "But Elytrians wait for no man. So yes, today." Wilbur coughed, and he wondered if that was an attempt at a joke, because Purpled sputtered. She turned sharply, and Tommy was once more entranced by her snow-white wings, as he always was with Elytrians. "Come. We must go."

Phil looked amused as he looked at the magenta-eyed Human. "She means no harm, Purpled. Elytrians believe in certain things when it comes to the afterlife. Technically, Sniff should have been buried three days after her death. Instead, here we are, weeks later."

"Sorry," Tommy muttered.

"It's not you," Phil told him as they trailed after Ch'lse'ae and H'kaly'pi. "It's also the location and the oddness of the whole circumstance."

"What, because she didn't have wings?" Perhaps his words came a bit harsh, but fortunately, her parents did not seem to hear.

"Many rituals could not be completed," Hannah answered in lieu of Phil's silence. "Many things could never be."

"Things," Lani said. "How...insightful."

"There isn't a word for it in Standard," Phil said. "Here, it is Pr'kygh'lini'moryn."

"That's a mouthful," he noted.

"It's another language," Wilbur said, nudging him. "Pr'kygh'lini'moryn," he repeated.

"Not quite, Wil," Phil said. "You have to twist the middle syllables. Pr'kygh'lini'moryn."

"Pr'kygh'lini'moryn," Wilbur said again. Phil inclined his head.

"That literally sounds the same," Drista whispered loudly.

"And that, Drista, is why you are not a communications officer, and I am," Wilbur said, eyes gleaming with amusement. "Elytrian, I've found, is one of the harder languages of the universe to learn." He glanced at Phil, who was hiding a smirk. "So many twists and turns."

"That's why you have to twist it before it twists you," Kristin spoke up.

"That's not how languages work at all!" Wilbur hissed, annoyed. "You keep *saying* that, but that's not how it works!"

"Is it?" Kristin said, glancing up at the far taller man and somehow managing to quail him. Well, Tommy wasn't shocked—he was far more afraid of the shorter Human woman than he was of Wilbur Soot. "Cor'lyu arch'ysi s'ri'ama'dza?" He blinked, surprised at the onslaught of lilted words that he did not understand.

"How did you *do* that?" Wilbur demanded.

Kristin smiled at him, eyes glittering. "Unlike you, Wilbur, I only speak formalities of most language—I am not strictly fluent in any but Standard...and Elytrian."

"How did I *not* know that?" Wilbur asked.

"I knew that," Techno deadpanned.

"I did," Tubbo said.

"Me too," Ranboo said.

"I did as well," Drista smirked.

Hannah shrugged, her blood-red wings shifting. "We've conversed in Elytrian before."

"I was there," Lani said, raising a hand.

"I'm the one who taught her," Phil said, blue eyes twinkling at Wilbur's gaping plight.

"I just assumed because she was married to an Elytrian," Niki shrugged.

"I'm not stupid," Purpled said, far more callous than the Merling doctor.

Wilbur looked at Tommy.

"Um, no," he said. "I've only known you for like—a month. Or something. I don't even know your favorite color, let alone what language everyone aboard the *L'manburg* speaks. Don't look at me."

Wilbur blinked at him and then down at his yellow sweater. "...you didn't assume?"

"I doubt it's yellow," he said dismissively, recognizing the look. "Ranboo's is hardly black *or* white. It's the light purple—the shade of alliums, y'know? And Purpled's is red, which is also interesting." Wilbur blinked, looking surprised.

"I...do not remember telling you that," the Enderian said slowly.

"Of course you don't," he said, making direct eye contact with an old friend. "But you told me. A long time ago."

"Well, you're not wrong," Purpled said tiredly. "As usual."

"Well, my favorite color is blue," Wilbur said. "Like the Eastern Sea on Atlantis when the skies are clear, and the sunrise reflects across the waters." Niki shook her head, smiling slightly. "And you, Tommy?"

"Hmm?" he asked.

"What's your favorite color?"

He bit his lip before answering. "Gold," he said finally, and Purpled exhaled sharply. "Gold like the grass of Pogtopia."

"But...that's brown," Drista said, confused.

"It wasn't always," he said lightly, not particularly minding the question, rude as it was. Lani elbowed the green-eyed Human pointedly. "It used to be prettier. You know, when some parasite didn't take it over."

There was something about the complex mix of stiff fabric and metal bits that make up his wingsuit that terrified and invigorated Tommy at the same time.

There was something about the cliff that he stood at, Drista and Lani at his sides, both of them wearing comparable, if more petite, wingsuits that terrified him as well.

Perhaps it was the height. He did not stand near the edge—Sniff's parents did, looking at them with careful eyes as Drista tugged at the fabric that reminded Tommy of the webbing between frog toes.

The snow shifted below his boots, and he shivered. Lani tilted her head and summoned a pair of hats from her dimensional-space-thingy—he still had no idea how that worked—tossing one to Drista, who plopped it over her braided hair thankfully and giving the other to Tommy. He took it, feeling the knitted wool with cold fingers, and then put it on when Lani gave him a look.

"It should be a twenty-minute flight," Ch'lse'ae said when the trio turned back to the pair of adults. "You have your trackers?"

"Just in case we crash and burn in the snow?" Drista grumbled under her breath, plucking at the small metal bracelet.

"Yes, ma'am," Lani answered.

"It is nice to meet a Shulker," H'kaly'pi said, smiling at the young girl, who looked at her feet, blushing. "Your kind are far and few."

Tommy took in a deep breath of the air, the snow around them making everything seem cleaner than it actually was.

The Ponyo Mountains.

That clearly wasn't an Elytrian name—but he bit his tongue back from the desperate curiosity that pooled in his stomach. Now was not the time for questions.

"Is there anyone else coming?" Lani asked politely, glancing around as if another high-altitude shuttle was going to come and drop some more people off.

"Lani—was it?" Ch'lse'ae asked. The Shulker nodded shortly. "Unfortunately, my daughter never really had any friends as a child—none that she put the names down for, anyway." Sniff's mother adopted a sad look on her face as she turned around, the snow beneath her feet falling off the cliff that lay millimeters away. "The abduction didn't make things easier."

Drista winced slightly, playing with the ends of her blonde hair. Tommy had explained what Sniff had told him shortly before they left—he thought that maybe, had she survived, she would have told them eventually.

"Tommy," H'kaly'pi said.

He looked at the older Elytrian man. "Uh—yes?"

"Do you have your feather?"

Lani and Drista frowned in confusion as Tommy nodded, feeling the carefully wrapped bundle in his pocket—carefully zipped up and packaged dutifully.

H'kaly'pi's eyes soften. "Good," he said. "Once we land, can you please get one of your family members to braid it into your hair?" He surveyed Tommy for a moment. "Fortunately, your hair should be long enough for a small braid."

"I don't..." he started, trailing off.

"Technoblade is good at braiding!" Lani said happily.

"Techno isn't—"

"I mean, *technically*, he is," Drista said thoughtfully. Tommy went silent so fast that he vowed he heard the snow connect to the ground from where it dropped off the precipice. "You know? Since

Phil is *your* guardian, and also Techno's and Wilbur's?" the Human girl shrugged slightly, green eyes gleaming. "That means that you're all—"

"Lonely," he said.

Drista's eye twitched. "I wasn't going to say that. You have us. That's not lonely."

He sighed. "Fine. An orphan."

"Don't tell Techno that," Lani said, her lips twisting into a smile. "He doesn't like orphans."

"I can see why Sni'yfyer'ich became friends with you three so fast," Ch'lse'ae spoke up, as Tommy opened his mouth to argue with the small Shulker. "You have similar senses of humor." Tommy exchanged a small look with the two girls, one of whom shrugged at him. "Now, we must be going. The others are waiting for us in the valley."

"I think I'd want to be back at Elytra," Sniff admitted. "As much as I hated that place afterward, it's pretty and well...it's my home, even after everything. Maybe the mountain ranges or some hidden valley. I've always loved the snow and the grass." She shook her head. "Cremated, though. And somewhere nice. Where the cities aren't, and where I can finally learn to breathe."

Tommy shivered slightly, though he doubted it was in any way because of the cold.

"It will be fine," H'kaly'pi said softly to Lani as she Shulker stepped to the edge of the cliff. "Don't worry. You have an Avian among you. He will save you should you fall."

"And you wouldn't?" Drista asked, raising her eyebrow and crossing her arms.

"I think Tommy would get to you first," Ch'lse'ae said, amusement radiating from her. "But do not worry. This journey signifies an end of a lifeline—this will not be the only cliff that we will stand at today. This Final Flight—Snif'yfyer'ich's Final Flight—" Her eyes saddened suddenly, her pale feathers puffing up. H'kaly'pi placed a hand upon her shoulder. "—it is like the legends from Terra, um...Valkyrie, is it?" Tommy shrugged, unsure, but both Drista and Lani nodded. "The three of us that carry her feathers are escorting her from her home to the valley, where the Gods will take over once we release her." She nodded at Drista and Lani. "Perhaps you don't carry a part of her physically, but...it is hard to explain in Standard."

"It's fine, Ch'lse'ae," he said, because she looked miserable. "We get the gist of it."

"Good," the Elytrian woman said, summoning a small smile. "Let's get this flight on, shall we?"

"Um—how?" Lani asked nervously, staring down at the cliff as H'kaly'pi and Ch'lse'ae moved to make room for Tommy and Drista.

It was...a long way down, to say the least. He wasn't scared by any means—he was an Avian, for fuck's sake—but his encounter on the Golden Gate Bridge did terrify him. Just a little bit.

"Just spread your arms," the Elytrian woman said. "The fabric will catch. Trust me." She hesitated. "Trust *it*. Trust yourselves."

"I think I'm just going to trust Tommy," Drista muttered.

Ch'lse'ae didn't seem to hear her. "Follow us through the mountains," she instructed. "You are allowed to have fun. I am sure Snif'yfyer'ich would have wanted you to."

Without another word, the two Elytrians raised their wings and tumbled off the edge, snapping their appendages out so sharply that Tommy heard Lani inhale.

"I swear to *fucking* God," Drista snapped. "If this stupid *thing* fails, you better catch me, Tommy Innes, or I swear to all the hells that I will haunt you until no tomorrow."

"Such confidence," he drawled, watching as the defiant green-eyed girl threw him the middle finger and slipped forward off the edge. He caught Lani's arm as she peered forward. "Have faith."

Drista snapped open her arms, and the wind caught her.

He smiled slightly as she followed Ch'lse'ae and H'kaly'pi's slow descent through the twining mountains.

"Your turn."

"I—" Lani said.

"For Sniff," he said softly. "Do not worry. I will catch you should you fall."

"Okay," Lani said breathlessly, and he watched her pitch forward, her arms tumbling before she regained bodily control and snapped them outwards much in the same way that Drista had.

He closed his eyes and followed her, feeling the rush of air that his body screamed at him to control so he would not fall—but he did not need to, because then his arms were out and the fabric caught, and he was gliding.

He wondered if Sniff, before she had left Elytra, had ever flown like this. Had ever *wanted* to fly like this after her wings had been ripped from her like a toy from a misbehaving child. He wondered if she had not only felt pity but also shame—if she had been bullied for her feathers being taken from her—no fault of her own, and yet hated for it all the same.

Drista's laugh of pure delight caught his ears, and he shifted his head, stubbornly wishing he'd tied his longer-than-average blonde hair back or something—Lani and Drista had been smart enough to tie their hair back, so it didn't whip them in their faces. Of course, he wasn't going to tell them they were smarter than him in that sense. Because he was super smart. Yes.

The wind chanted in his ears as he tilted his arms slightly, changing the direction of flight to follow Sniff's parents through the channel twining the mountains.

Every conversation he had ever had with Sniff filled his mind. Every laugh, every scowl, every peer over her shoulder to cheat off her notes—every glance, every look his friend had ever made, every rolling over her eyes as he flipped her off, every banter they had.

Flying did not ease the pain, only strengthened it. It did not make him forget.

He did not want to forget.

He knew as well as anyone that grief was an arrow to the heart, but it was an arrow that he would never remove.

Just...a little maiming?

We aim above the mark

to hit the mark.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Tommy sat in Survival Strategies, idly thinking of the empty chair that would soon lie next to him in his other classes, another reminder of a girl long gone. His mind drifted to the words that he had spoken in front of a crowd of people—a common thing that the Elytrians shared with Terrans; speaking at funerals.

He tapped the pen against the desk, heedless of the noise that it made, his other hand reaching up to brush the small braid behind his left ear. It had held a feather, once, made of gold and unnaturally beautiful. Techno had wordlessly braided it into his hair when he had asked, and Wilbur had had the common sense to know it probably wasn't a good time to tease him right then.

The feather was not there anymore; tucked away on his desk on the *L'manburg*—he'd permanently moved out of his dorm rooms, and Lani and Drista had soon followed Niki and Phil's pleas—highly protective of their...children. In Phil's case, his crewmates.

Perhaps for a good reason.

"Mr. Innes?"

He glanced up sharply to see the bitch—*ahem*, his teacher staring at him. Actually, the entire class was staring at him. "Huh?"

"I asked you a question, Mr. Innes," she said, her Feline ears twitching with irritation.

"Sorry," he said, not ashamed at all—yet forcing the regret to drip out of his mouth, false as it was. "I wasn't paying attention. Could you please repeat that?"

His teacher sucked in a breath as she glared at him with deep brown eyes. Tommy stared her down, not letting himself feel an ounce of fear. He was not scared of her. He *would not* be scared of her. "Perhaps in the future, you should pay more attention in class, Mr. Innes. Wouldn't want your grades to slip any more than they are."

"I was excused from class," he found himself saying, the words slipping out of his mouth before he could reign them in. "You know that. The Vice-Admiral messaged all my teachers."

"Death is a necessary part of life, Mr—"

A howl raged inside of him, a howl of wind and pain and fury and silent, scathing rage. "*Don't* pretend you know anything about my fu—my life," he snarled, standing up and upending his chair behind him. It slammed to the ground in the silence that followed. "Death may be a *necessary* part of life, *Ms. Zahendia*, but that does not mean I cannot mourn for the ones that I have lost."

Her eyes flashed in retaliation. "I would have assumed that you would know how to deal with it by now, considering what happened to your parents."

"That is a horrible thing to say!" Lani cried out before Tommy could even speak—not that he would have, because his tongue was stuck in his throat, and he felt like he could not breathe.

"You *bitch!*" Drista snarled, with far less poise than Lani and Tommy—although maybe he might have said that as well. He certainly felt like that. "You can't fucking say things like that!"

The classroom was dead silent. Students stared with awe and horror at the three teens who were standing at their desks, glaring at the source of their anger.

Ms. Zahendia's voice was clipped when she next spoke. "Ms. Taken, Ms. Underscore, and Mr. Innes, please come up to the front of the classroom."

Oh, here we go, Tommy thought, his eye twitching as he tried not to roll his eyes. For a second, he debated not listening to her—but immediately threw that thought aside. That would probably just make things worse. He exchanged a silent look with Lani—not with Drista, she was *far* too gone; and perhaps, once, he might have been as well, had he not learned the hard way how to reign in his emotions. The Shulker girl nodded, her chin wobbling as she swallowed, grabbing the Human girl's hand and dragging her to the front of the class.

"Haven't you learned not to disrespect your elders?" Ms. Zahendia said scathingly, and Tommy saw with aching horror that she now carried a metal ruler. He bit the inside of his lip and saw Lani's brown eyes widen with dawning horror.

"No, ma'am," he said, politeness dripping from his tone, the sarcasm buried underneath. "As you so admirably pointed out, my family died a long time ago."

Her eye twitched with wrath, and Tommy felt a growing sense of glee. "Palms out," she snarled at Lani.

"Miss—" Lani said, her rebellion faltering. "Please—"

"Palms. Out."

Tommy watched as the Shulker slowly turned her tiny hands around face-up, fear in her chocolate brown eyes.

"Don't," Drista whispered in his ear, when he made to move for the power inside him. "You'll only make it worse."

Was this his life, now? Forced to look on and be helpless as everyone in his life would get hurt?

"She'll survive," Drista murmured, so low only he heard. "*We* will survive, Tommy. Don't make it worse than it already is."

He still flinched when the ruler came down twice—two quick motions that made Lani cry out. He still cringed as the short scream of pain filled the air, and he saw half the class on the balls of their feet, trepidation, and nervousness in the other half: cowards, the lot of them.

Lani was sobbing quietly, on her knees, her palms in between her knees as she cried, and Drista's face went white and pale as she raised her own palms.

Tommy winced again when the ruler came down upon her raised palms—twice, always twice. Drista let out a small cry of pain, tears filling her bright green eyes as she sank to the ground in much the same way that Lani had—perhaps with far more decorum.

"Weak," Ms. Zahendia said dismissively to the two girls. "You wouldn't survive a day on a spaceship."

"They already have," he said, giving in to his urge to goad her further. "Remember? They are officers aboard the *L'manburg*."

"That means nothing here."

He shrugged, careless. Pretending. Always pretending. Drista glanced to her right to stare at him before turning back to Lani. He could see the white outlines of the ruler marks on her palms, a pale mark among pink skin. Perhaps a bit of blood from the edge of the metal as well. "Perhaps you say that now, *professor*." The title was said with malice and meaningfully causing fear. "Going to threaten the orphaned children, hmm?" He hummed, deep in his throat. "Because what—we don't have parents to protect us?"

"Palms out, Mr. Innes."

Without hesitation, he raised his hands. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw about twelve people with datapads in hand, clearly recording the whole thing. "You will learn," he told her. "There are more dangerous things than protective parents. Perhaps equal to that are protective siblings." He wanted to kill her—he wanted to see her dead for hurting his friends for unjust and disallowed punishments, but fighting back would not put things in their favor.

The Feline's eyes flashed as she lost her temper, and the ruler came down, harder than it ever had on Lani and Drista's palms. Good. That was good. Redirect her anger from them.

The burning pain that heated his palms made him clench his teeth, but he would not back down. Not to her. Not to some professor from a school he had *chosen* to go to. His right hand shook.

Then his left.

He saw stars for a second as his mind screamed at him to let out some semblance of pain, if only to redirect his attention to—something. Shouting. Crying.

He was Tommy Innes, and he would not back down.

"Do you know Dream?" he asked, as Ms. Zahendia paused, surprised at his resolve. "What—didn't he win a lot of Manhunts or something? That's Drista's brother."

"Mr. Taken has *nothing* to do—"

"He will," he snapped. "Once he finds out that you hurt his sister." Tommy tilted his head. "What about Niki? Lieutenant Nihachu? Chief Medical Officer, hmm? Heard of her? That's Lani's guardian." A soft, malevolent grin appeared on his face, promising pain and retribution.

His palms were still raised, so he wasn't entirely surprised when the ruler came down twice more, hitting the same spots they had before. White noise filled his ears as he clamped down on his instinct to scream, to crawl away, to lash out at her.

He was not the villain in this story. Perhaps this was what she was doing—trying to make him lash out, make it seem as if *he* were the villain.

He would not be the villain. His hands shook. Glancing downwards slightly, he grimaced at the bead of blood that pooled in his hands. She'd hit him with the sharp edge, then.

Well, he wasn't going to pretend it didn't hurt. It fucking *did*. It reminded him of things better left forgotten, of experiments in the Wasteland he cared not about, of a heavy fist to his cheek from a certain Avian on the Red Planet.

"And me?" he forced out, after about ten seconds of gathering his breath. "Have you, by chance, heard of Wilbur Soot? Of Technoblade?" His grin was filled with blood when he next smiled—he'd bitten through half his cheek, it seemed, with the way it stung. "They're *my* brothers, and they will fucking *destroy* you."

"Too weak to fight your own battles?" she taunted, in the silence that followed, save for Drista's quiet murmurings and Lani's quiet hiccuping sobs.

"Nah," he said. "I don't need to. I don't *want* to. Wilbur and Techno can't get expelled from the school, and I can. If I do something—and you're *hoping* I do, so I lash out, so you have a semblance of an excuse for what you just did—then I could be forced to leave the one place that I call home." Tommy shook his head. "As much as I *loathe* you, as much as I want to throw you across the room, I won't."

"Is that a threat?" the Feline asked him.

"Out of all my threats, you choose that one to focus on?" he snorted. "Trust me, Ms. Zahendia—you will have far more problems to deal with than *me*."

She raised the ruler and Tommy finally flinched, readying himself for another hit.

"That's *enough*," someone said, and Tommy turned to see a brown-haired Merling on her feet, fist clenched. "No more. I think you've doled out enough punishment, professor."

To his utter relief, though his inner thoughts howled otherwise, Ms. Zahendia lowered the ruler. "You may be right, Ms. Dayquan," she allowed, and Tommy dropped his hands to the side, trying to keep them as straight as possible. Ignoring the burning pain they felt at every slight movement, and glad for the Merling named—maybe Liz, in Standard. He didn't know.

"Drista," he said, and the Human girl hauled Lani to her feet wordlessly. He turned on his tail and stalked through the rows of desks, past his own. He paused near the Merling girl—yeah, he remembered, Lih'zoreon Dayquan, top of the class and usually silent. She was still on her feet, hesitating, and he nodded at her before continuing on his journey through the desks.

"Where do you think you're going, Mr. Innes?" Ms. Zahendia called out angrily from behind him.

"Home," he answered simply.

He laughed when the classroom door shut behind him, Lani, and Drista, and the Human girl gave him a wry look.

"Finally snapped?" she said, shakiness still evident in her voice. Not that Tommy blamed her. "Gone psycho?"

"Nah," he said, smirking slightly. "She's so fucked when we tell Phil."

"Ohhhh," Drista said, a smile of her own forming on her face. "You are so right."

"I usually am," he told her as they walked out of the school and down the steps and down to the transport station. "Being a tattletale has never felt so good."

Drista sighed. "I still wish I could've punted her to the sun."

"You probably could have," he said seriously.

"Isn't it...third period?" Wilbur said, frowning as the three of them walked back onto the bridge. "Shouldn't you guys be in school?"

It was a fair question. It had a fair answer.

"Uh—" Tubbo said, squinting at his younger sister. "Were you *crying*?" It was not said with disdain; more with protective anger.

"Hey, woah, Drista, you as well," Dream said, spinning around in his chair and narrowing his eyes on Drista. The green-eyed Human girl in question blinked at him, reaching up to scrub at her eyes with her elbows after a moment of deliberation. "Your eyes are puffy."

"Okay," Phil sighed, standing up and stretching his raven-black feathers. "What the fuck happened?"

In answer, the three of them held up their palms. Tommy had asked if the other two had wanted to stop at medbay before the bridge, but they'd refused—stubborn as him, it seemed. Phil paled slightly at the deep red bruises and slight smears of blood that stained the trio's hands; white around the edges and swollen. Tommy's was noticeably more visible, and even more, the ruler had cut into his skin, and two long thin lines could be seen oozing blood.

Techno was on his feet so fast that Tommy blinked, and the half-Piglin had ahold of his hand, a far gentler touch under his calloused hands than Tommy had ever expected. The air was breathily still as the commander examined the wound on his palm, tilting his head slightly before looking up at Tommy, his pig-like ears twitching in annoyance through his pink hair. "Who did this to you?"

"Uh...my teacher..." he managed.

"Your *teacher*?" Phil said in disbelief.

Drista hissed as she crossed and uncrossed her arms. "She hit us with a ruler."

"And you *let her*?" Dream said angrily.

"Well, you tell me, Dream," his sister replied bitterly. "Should I have fought back? Punched her in the face?"

"Yes," Dream and Techno said at the same time. Phil reached over and slapped the back of Techno's head, the half-Piglin rolling his eyes.

"Where would that have gotten me?" Drista said, raising an eyebrow. "Expelled, probably."

"So?" Dream said nastily, face contorting into a scowl. "You could have joined the crew as an intern. I doubt Toast would care."

"Yes, perhaps Lani and I could—but what about Tommy?" Drista said.

"Phil's his guardian."

"They know he's the son of Sam Innes—how long until it gets out that he's the leader of the Children's Rebellion?" Tommy blinked slowly at her words, trying to comprehend them. "They will never let him leave."

"Drista has a fair point, mate," Phil said cautiously, trying to even the budding warzone. "I'm newly his guardian. It won't hold after he gets expelled. Then his records become public." Tommy turned to look at him so fast that he was sure he got a crick in his neck. He hadn't known that. "What happens when the public finds out? Mass chaos. Like when Ranboo and Purpled were discovered."

"But he wouldn't be expelled," Dream retorted. "It would be *self-defense*."

Phil smiled sadly. "No, because the teacher could claim that she recognized abrasion and underlying anger issues."

"That's *bullshit*," Dream hissed.

"I'm not saying it isn't," Phil said, holding up his hands. "I'm just saying what would happen."

"So...why not prevent it in the first place?" Wilbur said slowly. "Ignore her?"

"Stop being a fucking adult," Tommy snapped angrily. "She told me that I was failing class since I was absent and when I told her that you messaged her *why* she said that death was a necessary part of life."

"Yeah, and then she told him he should be used to death because his parents were dead," Lani put in.

Time seemed to freeze.

"She did *not*," Phil said.

"She did," the three students chorused.

"Which teacher is this?" Techno drawled.

"The Survival Studies one, Ms. Zahendia," Drista supplied heavily. "The one that put me in detention and has been a bitch all year."

"Right," Techno said, stalking past Tommy towards the elevator. "Let me just go get—"

"Techno," Phil said sternly. The half-Piglin sighed and turned, brushing his hair out of his face. "You can't just go torture someone."

"Watch me."

"*Watch*—NO!" Phil shouted, and Tommy snorted. "You're going to get discharged from the Galactic Rebellion!"

"She hurt my little sister!" Dream said angrily, before Techno could even open his mouth. "I would do it myself, but I'm known for rash decisions—"

"Here's an idea," Phil said, crossing his arms. "*Nobody* goes and beats Ms. Zahendia up."

Wilbur cheered. "Go, Dadza!"

"Please never say that again," Phil said warily.

Techno let out a slight hiss of breath through his mouth, low enough so his lip curled and Tommy could see the tusks to their fullest extent. "So we're just gonna let her get away with it?" he grumbled.

Phil raised an eyebrow. "I didn't say that," he said. "At all." His wings ruffled as he turned to Wilbur, who was on his feet by the communications desk. "Wil, I want you to take the three children down to medbay."

"Why me?" Wilbur whined.

"I'm not a child!" Tommy shouted.

Phil clicked his tongue. "Last time I sent someone with Tommy and Lani away from the bridge, they *snuck aboard* an Arachnid starship." He hesitated. "Or, well, Tommy did. Lani only helped."

Ah. So they did know about Lani's guidance, even if it hadn't been mentioned in the trial.

"Yeah," Techno said. "Haven't you heard the sayin', Wil? An old dog never falls for the same trick twice."

Phil glared at him, and Techno grinned. "I'm calling Kristin up here," he announced. "You guys need parental surveillance."

"Aren't..." Wilbur started. "You know, *you* a parent?"

"Yes, but I'm going to go give the school a piece of my mind," Phil said patiently. "I'm an adult."

"So am I," Techno said.

"You and Dream act like children," Phil sniffed. "Wil, when I get back, Niki better have seen those three."

"I don't wanna see Niki," Tommy complained. "She always stabs me with needles."

"Maybe you deserve it," Tubbo said amicably. "You know since you see her every other day with a death wish." Tommy scowled at him. "Look, I'm just *saying*."

"It's not my fault this time!"

"Come on, kids," Wilbur said in a bored tone. "Let's go get your hands fixed up."

"I'm not a kid," Tommy glowered.

"I am," Drista said, half-gleefully. "Go beat up Ms. Zahendia for me, Dadza."

"How many times do I have to tell you?" Phil said disapprovingly. "Stop fucking calling me that! And I'm not going to beat up your teacher!"

"What now?" Niki sighed, wiping her hands on a cloth and tossing it to the side as the four entered medbay. "Wait, shouldn't you three be in school?"

"Their teacher abused them," Wilbur explained. Niki's eyes darkened.

Tommy elbowed him. "That is *not* what happened."

"She slapped them with a metal ruler," Wilbur said.

"Okay, yeah, *that* happened," he allowed.

"We're fine," Drista said brightly.

"Y-yeah," Lani managed.

"Hands," Niki said. Tommy shut up and put out his palms as Niki walked over and touched the end of his fingers to examine it further. "Ouch. That looks nasty." He shrugged slightly as Niki took Lani's hands next, giving the Shulker girl a comforting smile. "We'll get these right fixed up with a regenerator, don't worry."

"Wait," Tommy said. "Wilbur, can you take pictures?"

"Uh—why?" Wilbur asked.

"Evidence," he smirked. Wilbur's eyes flared slightly with realization before he drew out his datapad and took a few seconds taking pictures of the trio's hands.

"Just come sit down on this cot," Niki called over.

Tommy whitened when he noted the three hyposprays she had in her hand. "Not—"

"You should know by now, considering you're in the medbay *every day*," Niki said briskly. "It's just a short painkiller. Lasts a few minutes. And—the best part! Not in your neck! In your wrist!"

"Oh, so much better," Tommy grumbled, wincing slightly as Niki unceremoniously grabbed his wrist and stuck the needle into it. "I feel like you just hate me."

"No," Niki said. "You just need to stop getting hurt." Lani flinched as Niki injected the tiny needle into the vein at her wrist. Drista yawned.

"Huh," Tommy said, rotating his right hand. "It doesn't hurt."

"Of course," Niki said, smiling at him. "Now time for the other wrist."

"WHAT—"

Z.Z

Chapter Notes

Hey guys <3

This is gonna be the last chapter for a bit because we are going on a trip!

in our favorite rocketship - Juliet

Shut up.

no you love me <3

ANYWAY

We're going on a trip somewhere cool...so yeah. Maybe 2 weeks? A week and a half? WHO KNOWS?

enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It hurts to leave a light on for

nobody.

- Graham Foust

"So," Phil said slowly, looking up from another permission form. "Let me get this straight." Tommy swallowed nervously. "You want me to—what? Sign this form for a field trip?"

"It's—it's not a field trip," he said, stuttering slightly. "It's my end-of-the-term trip, Phil. I need that to pass Survival Strategies."

"Need I remind you of what happened *last* time I signed a permission form?" Phil asked, only half-joking. Techno snorted slightly.

"Ye-es," Tommy said, drawing out the word. "However, that was a one-time thing. I'm not part of track anymore."

"Uh-huh," Phil said, glancing down at the datapad again.

"Where's this one?" Wilbur called over, spinning around in his chair. "The heart of the Arachnid system?" Sarcasm dripped from his tongue as he blinked.

"Well," Tommy said. "Originally, it was *supposed* to be the Red Planet." Phil froze. "Yeah, they changed it, though. To, uh—the ice caves of Bree'lysn."

"Oh," Tubbo spoke up. "Isn't that the—"

"Avalanche," he said. "Yeah. We're supposed to do a simulation or some shit."

"You weren't in class?" Techno asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't know if you noticed, Technoblade," he snapped. "But I haven't been in that class for two weeks. The Vice-Admiral messaged Lani, Drista, and me and told us that we were excused from everything except the final simulation." Phil's eye twitched. "And I am *not* taking that class again."

"This is your teacher's last term, though," Dream said neutrally. "Thanks to Captain Philza over here."

"Why do you only use that rank to mock me, mate?" the Elytrian said amicably.

Dream rolled his eyes, running a hand through his sandy hair. "I signed Drista's, and I *know* for a fact that Eret signed Lani's. They're better off together."

"Until the ship explodes."

"On the bright side, it's a school-issued taxi ship," Tubbo said. "So it won't draw any attention!"

"I thought a *starship* would be safe," Phil grimaced. "Until it wasn't."

"That was only because of that super-secret prisoner aboard that nobody will tell me the identity of," Tommy complained. "No super-secret prisoners on the stupid fucking taxi, Phil. Just me and my class. And that bitch of a teacher."

"Don't worry, he has Drista," Dream added.

"Nice to see you on my side, big man."

"I'm not," the pilot said, leaning back and propping his feet up on the dash. "You and Ms-whatever-her-name-be are probably gonna get into some sort of catfight."

Wilbur whistled. "So then why do you want him to go?"

"Because Drista will whine and complain for all eternity," Dream shrugged. "Plus—this field trip has already happened three times in the past week with the *exact* teacher. It's not like the track meet at all. And Niki has Tommy's tracker."

"I swear to fucking God," Philza said as he signed off the datapad with a flourished sweep of his finger. Tommy resisted cheering out loud, alternatively doing a small revolution in place with a smirk and finger guns. "If you do not come back from this *without a scratch*, I am withdrawing you from Fleet school."

He swallowed. "Of course, Philza. You know everything, Philza. Everything and anything. The universe bows at your fingertips."

The Elytrian's eye twitched, his black feathers ruffling up. "Stop saying my name like that."

Don't piss her off, Wilbur had told them before they departed on the small transport. *Don't fucking piss her off, Tommy.*

In his defense, it wasn't mainly his fault. Ms. Zahendia was a bitch. There was also a seating chart for a four-hour ride. And Lani and Drista weren't next to him; they were next to Liz. He was next to a Feline named Ezra, and while xe were friendly, he didn't know xem very well at all—not enough to talk to xem, anyway. Ezra was pretty content to read some book on xir datapad anyway, and Tommy didn't want to talk at all. He sent some messages of complaint to his two friends before they started a card game with Liz, which they seemed to be losing, to their disgruntlement.

Tommy busied himself messaging the crewmates of the *L'manburg* before they were out of range, smiling slightly at Wilbur's bluffed hatred for him and Techno's monotone voice that could be heard through the text that he sent. Niki had a few threats for him as well, but Phil was more peaceful and bade him good luck on his simulation exam. Ranboo and Purpled and Tubbo all told him not to get into any more trouble. He was about to send an annoying face back at the latter when his datapad was wrenched out of his hands, and he looked up, sighing when he saw his Feline teacher.

"No datapads," she told him.

"*Excuse me?*" he cried out, and Ezra glanced up from xir datapad. "Everyone else is using one!"

"Yeah, in my opinion, that's racism," Drista spoke up, only half-joking. Liz elbowed her, but the Human ignored her. "What's wrong, Zelma?" She tilted her head, and Tommy choked at the usage of their teacher's first name. "Mad that his dad got you fired?"

"Shut up," Ms. Zahendia sneered, and Lani stood up beside Drista. The transport was dead silent. "His *father* has been dead for seven years. Nobody in the Galactic Rebellion could ever want someone like *him*."

"Is that why we're in neutral space?" Ezra said, raising xir eyebrow. "We don't seem to be heading to Bree'lysn."

"What do you know, Ezra?" Ms. Zahendia asked him. "Nothing."

"I'm training to be a navigator, miss," Ezra said politely, xir lips twisting in slight amusement and annoyance. "We're in neutral space right now."

"What the fuck," Tommy said, ignoring the fear that trickled down his spine. "Where are we going?"

Ms. Zahendia scowled at him. "Bree'lysn."

"*That's* a fucking lie!" Drista called out, her voice slightly shrill as Ezra shook xir head.

Tommy felt a second trickle of fear rush through him as Ms. Zahendia reached into her pocket and pulled out a phaser, and pointed it at the green-eyed Human girl. Lani gasped slightly, and Tommy noted that her hand grasped for her fourth-dimensional space—but unfortunately, it was empty, as she'd been forced to empty it as some items were acknowledged as smuggling things illegally.

"Get off my ship," Ms. Zahendia rasped.

"What—we're in lightspeed!" Liz said, her eyes wide. She had her hands up.

Ms. Zahendia tilted her head. "Computer," she said clearly. "Stop."

Tommy almost fell over as the ship jolted out of hyperspace, the stars returning to tiny pinpricks instead of the stretched-out version they had been. He glanced out the window to see that they drifted above a red planet—not *the* Red Planet; that one was only called that because of its red sunsets; in reality, it was more golden from space than red. He swallowed slightly. About half of it were covered in large cracks—and probably some smaller ones he couldn't see—canyons, from rivers long dried up. Canyons and red rock. There was a bit of greenery to the side of it—some sort of swamp or forest; he couldn't tell from here.

"He would have paid a lot for you, you know," Ms. Zahendia said, tilting her head. "But I'd prefer it if you slowly starved to death on an uninhabited planet." Her smile was anything but pleasant.

"Isn't that right, *survivor of the Children's Rebellion*?" The title was hissed and full of spite.

"How—" Tommy said, fumbling for words in the dead silence of the ship. Ezra looked wary, and Liz had a hand over her mouth, but nobody had weapons—they had all been taken before launch. "You—you shouldn't know that," he finished numbly.

"They were right," Ms. Zahendia sighed. "Avians are entirely too much work for their own good." Tommy's breath caught in his throat, and he made eye contact with Lani, who looked confused. Avians, *plural*. Like she'd been in contact with more than him. Ms. Zahendia's eyes sharpened. "Get off my ship."

"I—" he said, holding up his hands when the Feline shifted her grip on the phaser pointed at Drista. "We can talk about this, Zee Zee—"

"*Don't* fucking call me that, you stupid child."

"Sorry," he said, mentally berating himself. "I—uh—"

"And if you even *think* about trying to take me down," Ms. Zahendia continued. "You won't. You don't have a phaser, and I will blow this goddamned ship to smithereens if you even so much as make a negative mood towards me." Her eyes glinted as she withdrew a small device with a cliché red button at the top and showed them. "And don't even think about using your *Avian* powers. If I die, it explodes as well."

He was trapped.

He didn't know what to do.

He couldn't stop her heart—he didn't know how; the Arachnids had been a fluke, and if he *tried* and she wasn't lying, then everyone would die, and it would be his fault. He couldn't constrict her breathing—he also would have to do trial and error to do that, and there was no trial, no time. She would press the button before she passed out, and then they would be dead.

"Get in the escape pod, *boy*," she snapped. "And take your two bitchy friends as well before I get it through my mind to kill them and dump them into the dead of space."

Lani grabbed Drista's hand, shaking slightly as they squeezed past Liz, the Merling giving Tommy a slightly stricken look as she let them pass. Tommy shrugged at her slightly, at a loss for words.

"Thomas," she said as Tommy moved towards the back of the ship where the escape pod lay, silently cursing himself for not sneaking a weapon on himself.

Next time, he swore.

And then he realized that there probably wouldn't be a next time.

He pivoted sharply, and she beckoned, the phaser now pointed at Ezra, who, to his credit, was attempting not to look scared. He walked over, ignoring Lani's groan of fear as he passed the two girls, Drista's hand clutching his for a brief second before the fleeting touch was gone.

"Wrist," she said bluntly, and Tommy went white before holding out his left hand.

"Other fucking hand."

He closed his eyes and bit his lip as he switched arms. Ms. Zahendia grabbed it roughly, and he winced, trying not to cry—not at the pain, because it didn't quite hurt, but because he was so afraid that any wrong move would kill everyone aboard the ship—and then it would be his fault, again. The ex-professor looked at his forearm for a second, and then Tommy let out a small shriek as she dug her claws into his skin and yanked out the tracker that lay right beneath the skin. Lani let out a small yelp as everyone watched the blood drip to the floor of the ship.

"Quaint little thing," Ms. Zahendia murmured. Tommy watched with a shaking figure, his other hand cupping his forearm, blood running down his hand, as the Feline gripped it in her clawed hand and crushed it.

He watched the small electronic—and the last bit of hope—fall to the floor of the ship.

"Get out," the Feline told him. "*Now.*"

Tommy listened because he had no way out of this—he had no idea how to do hand-to-hand combat and had rarely ever thrown a punch, much as he liked to brag about how cool he was. He wasn't perfect; he couldn't do many things.

If he got out of this, he resolved to get Techno to teach him the nature of combat. Especially if this kept happening.

Liz's face was twisted in anger as the escape pod door slid close, and it was ejected towards the planet in the middle of arbitrary space. Lani had her head between her knees and was trying to stifle her sobs. Tommy reached out and grabbed a bit of the escape pod so he wouldn't fall on his face.

"Okay," he said, as the taxi once more entered lightspeed and vanished from the porthole view.

"Okay," Drista repeated. "I—I didn't expect that."

He shrugged. "To be fair, neither did I."

"How are you—!" Lani started, raising her head. "How are you two so calm about this?!"

"I've been in worse situations," he said truthfully. "This was...really fast. That all happened too fast."

"You could have killed her," Drista told him, tapping her hand against the seat that she sat in. They would hit the atmosphere in about twenty seconds.

"I know," he said. "But I didn't know if she was lying about us all dying." And to be fair, he didn't know what would happen if he tried.

"I suppose she was," Drista said slowly. "Why wouldn't she?"

"I couldn't take that bluff," he admitted. "Then it would be my fault again that everyone on that shuttle would be dead." He cracked a slight grin. "At least we're alive."

"Not if this pod hits a body of water," Drista muttered, leaning her head against the headrest as the escape pod hit the atmosphere and the shields began to deteriorate. The only thing visible outside of the viewing port was fire as the pod flew towards the earth like a meteor from space.

"It should auto-correct to land," he told her absently, reaching over and grabbing Lani's hand when the pale-faced Shulker began to shake in the beginnings of a panic attack. "Hey. Hey. We're going to live."

"How much longer?" Drista asked him.

"Um," he said. "Fifteen seconds?"

The Human rolled her eyes. "No, I meant how long can we survive on an uninhabited planet?"

"It's not uninhabited," he said. "By sentient life, maybe. But there are—I don't know, animals and shit. It has an atmosphere and some greenery." Despite the planet mostly being mesas—he saw that from space—there had been patches of vegetation; he'd seen that from space. "Brace yourselves," he added, almost in afterthought. "But don't clench your teeth."

Fortunately, the pod was padded, and they were strapped in. Still, Tommy's head jerked forward, and his seatbelt tore into his neck slightly as the pod hit the terrain at a ground-rattling pace. Lani screamed slightly, her hands white-knuckled, but at least her mouth was open—she wouldn't be shattering any teeth from the impact. The only thing in the silence as the rocks fell silent was the heavy panting of three individuals.

"Well," Tommy said. "That could have gone worse."

"Could have fucking gone better," Drista grumbled as she rubbed her neck, where a burn on her neck from the seatbelt also showed. Tommy grimaced as he unbuckled himself, the floor at a slight tilt. It was fortunate they hadn't landed upside down or some shit.

"Now what?" Lani groaned as Drista helped her unbuckle her seatbelt.

"There should be a medkit and some minor rations," he said bluntly, walking over to a pair of small packs and shifting through it while the two girls gathered themselves. "Even if Zee Zee didn't want it here, they had to check off the ship for take-off—and this is mandatory." There was a rope on one of the hooks and a grapple, as well as a knife and a pair of flares in one of the side pockets. A small pile of blankets lay in the corner of the escape pod, upended in the crash.

"Why do you know so much?" Lani said warily.

"I grew up on a spaceship," he said with a small smile as he wrapped some bandages around his wrist, tearing off the edge with his teeth—no expensive electronics here. He reached into the pack and tossed some salve to Drista, who took it deftly. Lani grabbed it from her friend and began dabbing it on the wound.

He almost missed Niki's medbay.

"Plus," he added absently. "I've been in an escape pod before." Drista blanched slightly as she recalled his story, and he grabbed the medkit and the rations pack and gave the medkit to Lani, who took it hesitantly, tucking the soothing salve back into one of the pockets. "You're the nurse," he told her.

"I'm—" Lani said, blinking. "I'm not even graduated!"

"Still have more experience than Drista and I combined," he told her, strapping the rations pack to his back. "Drista, can you grab the blankets?"

"Sure," the girl said, piling the four in her arms. "Now what?"

"We see if the air is breathable," he said grimly.

"Wait—" Lani started.

Tommy slammed his hand on the button and squinted his eyes as the doors opened to reveal a slightly smoking red rock wall. They'd sunk deep into the earth, which explained the harsh landing.

"You could have killed us," Drista berated him as Tommy reached out and touched the wall. Looking up, he noted that the sky was a pure pale blue, clouds dotting the area.

"If the air weren't breathable, then we would have slowly suffocated inside the escape pod," he told her.

"Yeah, but at least we'd live longer," Drista grumbled.

"It would take seven hours and thirty minutes for the air to run out," he told her, matter of fact. "I'm sorry, but they're not going to find us in that short amount of time." Drista clenched her teeth, but looked away. "I'd say the minimum is two weeks. I would have rather died suffocating than slowly dying of asphyxiation, knowing that we never tried."

"We're going to have to climb that?" Lani asked warily, talking about the twenty-foot steep hole that the escape pod had created as it had landed.

Tommy tilted his head and nodded. "Lani, you can put the blankets in your fourth-dimensional space, right?" The Shulker held out her hands wordlessly, and Drista dumped them into her arms. Tommy stepped out of the pod, tapping the stone. "We either climb this or stay down here. I would rather we climb out."

"Okay," Drista sighed. "I know Lani doesn't have any rock wall training because she's a Shulker—smaller lungs," she reminded Tommy. "I do. It's part of one of the curriculums we took."

"Well, sorry to break it to you," he said. "I don't. *However*, the gravity is less than Terra, so you should have an easier time at it." He stepped back into the pod and grabbed a grapple and a thirty-

foot loop of rope. "Tie this to your waist."

Drista smirked at him. "I know," she said, doing as Tommy said and hooking the rope and the grapple around her body. She jumped experimentally and nodded at Tommy's estimation of the gravity. "Right. I got this."

"Are you telling us, or are you telling yourself?" Tommy said cheekily. Drista swatted his arm as she grabbed the first outcropping of rock that the mess of the pod had created.

"This isn't the worst free climb I've ever done!" she called out. "But it's certainly the first one under pressure."

"Yeah, climb up there the first time, or we all die," he said dryly. "Don't worry. If you fall, I'll try to catch you."

"Thanks," Drista said.

She climbed up the twenty-foot wall in about three minutes without stumbling once. Lani went up next, gripping the rope tightly that Drista sent down, the medics' bag slung across her back. Tommy was last, using his feet and the rope to climb up the wall with a bit of upper body strength. His arms were slightly aching when he reached the top, and Drista grasped his forearm and hauled him the rest of the way up.

"We should split up the stuff," he said suddenly, putting the bag down. "There are two bags—Lani is a Shulker, so Drista and I get the bags, but just in case we're separated, we should split it up evenly."

"There are two flares," Lani said.

"Right," he said. "Take them." He held them out, one to each of the two girls. Lani took hers, and he watched as it vanished within her palm. Drista blinked at him.

"What about you?" the girl asked.

"I'll be fine," he told her. "We're on a planet full of canyons. I'm the only one that's *not* going to fall into a ravine and break my leg." Drista nodded, primarily to herself, and took the red flare and the match attached to it. Tommy knelt down and divided up the supplies into three piles. Lani stood by her own and made her group of rations vanish and a small pile of bandages and disinfectant, as well as a single splint—one of four. Tommy packed Drista's third into the empty medical bag and handed it to the green-eyed Human girl, who took it with a tired look and swung it over her shoulder.

"I still don't understand how your fourth-dimensional space works," Tommy told Lani as he watched with slight reverence as she made a small pack of water purification tablets disappear with a flick of her wrist.

"I don't understand how you can stop a persons' heart," the Shulker retorted with no real heat behind it, her eyes twinkling. Tommy snorted as he shouldered his own pack, shielding his eyes from the heat of day. Drista had already shed her uniform jacket, putting it over her head like an umbrella. Tommy did the same, revealing his white and red undershirt, tying it around his waist. Lani had already made hers vanish, and she smirked when Tommy rolled his eyes at her.

The ground of them was red and sandy, and he could see deep ravines and canyons surrounding them, though it wasn't as bad as the pictures he'd seen of the Grand Canyon on Terra. He knew it was probably worse on other places of the planet—damn, he didn't even know its name—but fortunately, it was a desert here.

Or unfortunately.

Drista pointed in a direction—northwest, maybe, he thought—and Tommy squinted. "There's greenery that way!" she said eagerly, and Tommy recalled the green area he'd seen from space. Hope rose in his chest.

"I can't see that far," he grumbled, cursing his Avian biology. Lani shrugged when Drista looked at her next, the Shulker already looking slightly wearied under the heat of the sun. "I believe you, though."

"Then let's go," the Human said with a bright grin.

Traversing across an unknown planet with unknown predators and unknown terrain was perhaps one of the most nerve-wracking things that Tommy had ever done. Perhaps neither Lani nor Drista knew it, but sand monsters existed on other planets that were much like trapdoor spiders from Terra, only much, *much* bigger. Maybe not this one, but he was still wary. He'd read enough

Lani lagged behind a few times, sweat pooling down the sides of her face, and she often had to stop for rest. Tommy didn't particularly mind, sometimes leaning against the rocks in the shade of the giant rocks and wondered what they were made of and whether Tubbo would enjoy this place.

"We need to reach there by nightfall," he told them softly after their fourth rest.

"What?" Lani gasped, and he felt bad for her—for all the strengths she had, exertion like this was a great weakness. "Why?"

"Because predators come out at night," he explained slowly, and Lani blanched. "You know, like on Terra? Bears? Coyotes? Wolves? Mountain lions?"

"We don't have a weapon," Drista groaned.

Tommy withdrew the single knife from his pockets. "I have this."

"Oh yeah, and that's gonna do so much against a bear-sized animal with sharp teeth," Drista said, slightly scathingly. Tommy stuck his tongue out at her, and she rolled her eyes at him. Lani sighed in the background.

"Let's go," the Shulker said.

They set off again, heading around ravines and cracks.

They did not make it to the forest—Tommy could see it by now; its dense greenery about ten miles away. They did not make it before nightfall, and they did not make it at all.

The moon rose, and Tommy heard the slice of a howl in the air that caused Lani to groan in fear and the hairs to stand up on his neck.

"Run," he breathed, spinning around on the flat plateau to see a wolf-like *thing*—bright red fur and shiny teeth and closing in fast—"HOLD YOUR FUCKING BREATH AND RUN!"

The Avian in him snarled and pounced, and suddenly his feet flew across the sand, and Drista nearly tumbled as she found that the air in front of her no longer beat against her face, and Lani was lagging behind, and he pushed her on—

Dead end.

They had turned the wrong way, and the canyon they had been traversing around was now on either side of them. The crack wasn't extensive—maybe thirty yards across—but it was deep enough that if they jumped, they would die.

"We're going to die," Drista said, her face white and her green eyes sparkling with stars and tears and fear. "Oh my God, we're going to die."

Tommy looked behind him, and the *thing* was twenty yards from them, gaining fast, all-white gleaming teeth and predatorial eyes, and if he did not make a decision *now*, they were all going to die anyway—

Tommy reached for its heart and tried to cut off the oxygen, but he didn't know *how* and it failed, and he backed off as he stumbled and nearly fainted.

"Jump," he breathed. "Jump off the edge. I'll try—I'll try to catch you."

" *What ?*" Lani shrieked. "You—you're going to faint, and then we'll fall—"

"WE EITHER DIE TO THE CLIFF, OR WE GET EATEN ALIVE!" he roared.

His neck prickled, and Tommy turned to see two figures standing on the other side of the canyon, staring at him, dressed in leathers and fur—Humans, they seemed to be, a male and a female.

The beast leaped for them, and Tommy pushed Drista and Lani off the edge as teeth snapped right where Lani had been before jumping off himself, reaching for everything in him to cushion the air under his feet and glide.

There was nothing left.

Chapter End Notes

Oh yeah, did I mention this is a sort of cliffhanger?

You are not alone.

*To be lost is as
legitimate a part of your
process as being found.*

- Alex Ebert

His name was Tommy Innes, and he did not catch two of his friends as they fell towards the cold rock at the bottom of the ravine. He *tried*, he really did, but he grasped their hands, and he did not have it in him to catch their fall—a bit, enough for *himself*, but not for three children.

His name was Tommy Innes, and he heard the howl of misery from the monster that had been chasing them across the plateau, one that was mirrored in his own lips as he watched his friends fall to their deaths—decided that perhaps he should have taken his chances with that knife and that beast with glowing eyes and razor-sharp teeth.

His name was Tommy Innes, and that night he learned that he was not alone. That he was not the only Avian—besides Chroma—left; that others lived.

He lost his grip on Drista's hand first—it slipped, and he cried her name in fear, and she stared up at him with green eyes that reflected the moon and a horrible despair behind them.

Lani was second, her eyes teary and her mouth open in a wordless scream as her chocolate hair whipped around her face, and Tommy held her by the fingertips as they fell—and then they lost contact, and the rock neared him, taunting them of their deadly fate.

And then there were two figures next to them, one grabbing Drista and the other Lani, and he gasped as his arm was nearly yanked out of his socket, and he came to a floating halt to the rock, the only injury from a small pebble that flicked up as his hand smacked against the cold stone floor.

Tommy rolled to his feet, yanking his knife from where it was tucked in his belt, and held it up warningly at the male and female that stood opposingly in the glimmering starlight, not gasping for breath, not a hair out of place—not even looking like they had fallen two hundred feet—because they *had*; they were no longer on the opposite side of the canyon. All five of them were down here.

"Oh my *God*," Drista shrieked, leaping up and pinching herself. "I'm *alive*?"

Lani was blinking up at the fissure that gave way to starlight, her mouth slightly open, perhaps in disbelief. She was slower to get up, and also noticed what Tommy seemed to—particularly the two people that were now in the ravine with them. She shifted her feet into a defensive position slightly, as if that would have done anything.

Tommy raised his head, and he met the woman's coffee-brown eyes, and he felt the spark slip because his shields were not up—and neither was hers, because a bond slid into place so fast that he gasped and stumbled back, holding a hand to his head.

"Tommy?" Drista said, her voice raising an octave as she bent down and grasped the fallen knife. "What did—" she was addressing the man and the woman. "What did you *do* to him?"

"I'm—I'm sorry," the woman said, as Tommy sat blinking, feeling the curiousness and surprise that radiated across their—their Avian bond. "I had no idea that your friend was an Avian."

Drista stiffened furiously. "How do you know that?" she spat.

It was the man that answered. "Because we are too," he said, calmer than Tommy felt as he attempted to throw up shields that he had not constructed in years and years. That he hadn't *had* to, because he had been alone without any of his kind.

Avians traveled in flocks for a reason. While Elytrians could form bonds willingly through mind-melders, as they were called on Elytra, in order to form some sort of close-ranged telepathy and emotion-feeling, Avians were more prone to accidental bondings mind-to-mind. That was why, from a young age, baby Avians were kept between close family, as they were inclined to accidentally create bonds that—unlike Elytrians—would only be undone in death. Elytrian bonds were far more complicated in the sense that you could only have one in your life, and it was usually

done between mates—as Kristin and Phil had gotten shortly after Sniff's funeral on Elytra. Avian bonds were spontaneous and done between family members, and they did not allow short-ranged telepathy—it was more like a compass.

Always able to find your way home.

Tommy's bonds had been broken on that fateful day seven years ago, and he hadn't had a mental compass pointing home until Chroma had taken him from the Arachnids under the illusion that he would be going to a school to learn. He had been a kid four years ago, and he had been a lone Avian—and lone Avians were prone to manipulation.

Chroma had formed a bond with him, a bond that Tommy broke the day his friends were executed, as fucking painful as it was—and should have been impossible, but he broke it anyway—and that bond that made Tommy think that Chroma was a *friend*, that he could be trusted. He was sure that the cracks in the bond first appeared when Grian told him that familial abuse was wrong, was not a good thing.

He hadn't had his shields up—shields that he had perfected at three years old, and had kept up for seven years—since he was ten years old, and he supposed that this was his fate now.

"I don't believe that," Drista was saying coolly. "Tommy n' Chroma are the only ones left."

"Drista," he said warily, finally stopping his emotions from pouring down the bond as he installed the shields. "She's not lying."

"*What?*" the Human demanded. "How do you know?"

"Because I have an Avian bond with her," he said simply, and he met the woman's eyes as she stared at him in—awe? Shock? Curiousness?—he couldn't really tell. "And I don't—I don't think she means any harm."

"I don't," the woman said, smiling slightly. Cautiously, he opened a small doorway and felt the flood of her truthfulness before he shuddered at the unfamiliarity of her persona and threw them up again. The surge of emotions that weren't his own reminded him a bit of Chroma and the faked sincerity the other Avian had often flooded the bond with—he had learned to look deeper, and this

female Avian wasn't forcing any emotions into them; merely keeping them open and waiting for him to find them tentatively.

Tears sprung to his eyes. He remembered the feeling of losing his father's mental compass—his aunt was a Feline, and he did not have a mental bond with her—but he remembered feeling contentment and grief down the bond before Sam died—and then Chroma overwhelmed him with false sincerity years later.

"I'm Tommy," he said finally, stepping forward and holding out a hand.

The woman smiled at him, coffee eyes shining. "I'm Rae," she said. "It is very nice to meet you, Tommy." She met Tommy's hand, and he clasped it warmly.

"I'm Sykkuno," the male Avian offered up next, though he didn't take Tommy's hand.

"Nice to meet you," he said, smiling sincerely and feeling a small burst of happiness in his chest that he was sure Rae felt through his weak shields. Gods, he wasn't the only Avian left. "This is Lani—" he pointed out the Shulker. "And the stupid one with the knife is Drista. You can put it down, by the way."

Drista hissed, but lowered the weapon. "What do you mean you have a bond?" she said suspiciously.

"It was an accident," Rae said when Tommy couldn't really find the words to explain. "We didn't have our shields up. I didn't expect to find another Avian—you know, since we were all supposed to be dead."

"I'm the son of Sam Innes," he said. "Of the *H.M.S Fran*."

"Oh," Rae said, blinking. "I—had no idea that he had a kid."

"Yeah, not many people did," he muttered.

"Anyway," Sykkuno continued. "It's a bond that allows emotions to pass between two individuals."

"Ooh!" Lani said, perking up. "Like the mind melder on Elytra?"

"Not...exactly," Rae said. "Elytrians have a different kind of bond—how about we explain it back home?" She smiled kindly. "I don't want to stand in this ravine all night before a pack of r'kylush ty'lim'en find us."

"Really?" Tommy said, raising an eyebrow as he translated it in his mind. "Wolf thing?"

Rae blushed. "I—why do you speak Elytrian?"

"I don't," he said, despite having picked up a few words here and there.

"Our ship captain," Drista said briskly. "He's Elytrian."

"You really don't trust us, do you?" Sykkuno asked her.

Drista sniffed. "Not at all. Why?"

"Just wondering."

"Right!" Rae said, smiling brightly and suddenly looking slightly predatory. "Unless you want to stay here and get eaten, die of dehydration, or starve to death, I recommend that we get out of here!"

"What if you're leading us to our deaths?" Drista asked. Tommy rolled his eyes.

"I would have let you splat to your deaths if I wanted you to die," Rae said.

"*Rae*," Sykkuno hissed. "They're kids."

"They're kids—?" Rae frowned and squinted. "You guys are like seventeen, right?"

Tommy raised his hand. "*I'm* seventeen."

"An adult, then," Rae nodded. Tommy frowned at her, but shrugged and let it go.

"Fifteen," Drista said, bored.

"Fourteen," Lani said proudly.

"See?" Sykkuno said. "Kids." He glanced at Tommy. "Mostly."

"What are *kids* doing on Polus?" Rae demanded.

"Field trip," Tommy explained shortly. "Discharged. Crashed."

"Ah."

"I still don't—" Drista said skeptically.

Tommy threw up his hands. "I'd rather die stabbed in the back than die a slow death at the bottom of a ravine," he said, and Drista huffed. Not that he thought that Rae and Sykkuno would stab him in the back, but...he had to calm the girl down just a little.

"Says the one that didn't catch me." Tommy winced slightly.

"O-okay," Sykkuno said, interrupting them with a slight stutter. "Can we please get going now?"

"Fine," Drista grumbled. "But you make one wrong move, and I'll stab you."

"You make one wrong move," Rae retorted. "And I'll stop your heart."

That really wasn't reassuring, but from the way that Rae stood protectively in front of the other Avian, who pursed his lips and didn't look *quite* appreciative of her protectiveness, it was clearly done in defense.

Wilbur leaned back in his chair, spinning a pen in between his fingers as he listened to Phil go on and on about some emergency situation that he really *didn't* care about. Techno, the stuck-up fucker, was paying close attention, but at least Tubbo agreed with him and looked half-asleep at his desk.

Dream was only paying attention to compete with Technoblade. Wilbur would shift his attention to the blonde-haired Human and see him only paying attention when Techno was.

"Wilbur!"

He jolted, blinking. "Yeah?"

"Are you paying attention?"

"Yep," he lied. "Emergency situations."

"Specifically what?" Phil said dubiously. Dream snickered, and Wilbur resisted making a face at the pilot. Techno looked mildly disappointed but not surprised. Tubbo was just fast asleep.

"Uh..." Wilbur said. His eyes flicked to the medbay channel as it flashed red and he held up a finger. "One second. I'm getting a comm."

"Wil," Phil sighed.

"Lieutenant Wilbur here at bridge command," he said clearly, holding his finger over the send button. "What's up?"

› *Lieutenant Nihachu here. We have a problem.* ‹

Wilbur grimaced at the desperation and urgency in her tone. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tubbo raise his head from his arms to look at his desk blearily. Phil was frowning as well. "Hit me."

› *Tommy's tracker stopped working.* ‹

His heart stopped, and he clenched his fist so hard that blood was drawn from his nails digging into his skin. Wincing at the pain, Wilbur willed himself intangible to rid himself of the pain before calming down and flashing himself back to being tangible. Even doing it that little made him weary—Phantoms were like that—but he had to get ahold of himself. "What?" he laughed nervously. "Like it malfunctioned?"

› *No. The vitals shorted out too. It's like it was destroyed.* ‹

"Fucking *hell*," Wilbur spat as Dream cursed under his breath, and Tubbo froze. Their sisters were aboard that ship—if anything had happened to it— "We can download and get their flight path, right?"

› *I — I can't read star maps very well, but I don't think they went to the place they were supposed to. Even if the tracker was destroyed, there are nanos that I can track as well, but they stopped working shortly after the vitals shorted out.* ‹

"Why didn't you tell us earlier?" he asked.

› *My thirty-six-hour shift was yesterday and the day before. I just woke up.* ‹

He hissed through his teeth as he spun around in his chair. "Phil—"

"Contact the Vice-Admiral," his captain said, and Wilbur nodded.

› *Dream, I know you're probably listening — I'll send you the flight path.* ‹

"Gotcha," Dream said, his voice cracking partially through. Besides the clicking of buttons as Wilbur furiously attempted to get a comm through to Toast, there was dead silence. Tubbo had his head in his hands, and seemed to be praying. Techno looked mildly worried, but he didn't show

emotions very openly at all, as it was looked down upon to in Piglin culture. Phil's feathers were agitated, and if it had been in private and he didn't have a job to do at that moment, he would have gotten up and fixed them—if Kristin didn't get there first.

"This isn't a pathway to Bree'lysn at *all*," Dream shouted furiously, about a minute and a half later. Tubbo jumped, looking up with tear-filled eyes. "This taxi's path goes straight into Arachnid territory."

"Oh, fucking *shit*," Phil cursed loudly. Wilbur gritted his teeth to keep his hands from shaking.

Tommy couldn't be dead. Tommy—*Tommy*, the boy who had lay next to him below the stars and listened dutifully as he'd ranted about Star Signs and Polaris; the boy whom he had seen life flood into his eyes little by little after that one day at that one bridge—the boy who had played the violin of a friend and had fallen asleep next to him watching the moon rise.

He'd just met him. He loved him. He was tall and annoying and made rash decisions, and lashed out at everyone who tried to find his secrets, but he was *caring* and loving and someone who Wilbur wanted to be in his life forever.

His thoughts ended as the elevator door burst open, and everyone turned to see Ranboo and Purpled standing there, one of them panting more than the other.

"Tommy," Purpled gasped. "Where is he?"

"Purpled—" Phil started.

"*Don't*," Purpled said through gritted teeth. "He's one of my best friends, Phil. Don't make me leave."

"I wasn't going to, mate," the Elytrian said cautiously. "How did you find out?"

Ranboo raised his hand slowly. "I—I uh," he said. "I heard Niki." He blinked and glanced at Tubbo, who had tears down on his face. Ranboo sighed and paced over to his—his ex-husband, Wilbur

supposed, and a beautiful friendship. Tubbo let out a quiet, cracked sob, and Wilbur was reminded that Tubbo was, no matter how smart he was, still a kid. Dream's teeth were clenched, and his hands shook slightly under his desk—and it was Drista and Lani, and Tommy and Wilbur wanted to cry.

He didn't. He bit his lip and turned around in his chair as Purpled stood there, magenta eyes looking lost, and Ranboo clutched Tubbo to his chest, making slight soothing sounds from his esophagus.

"I—" Wilbur cut himself off, coughing slightly to dispel the scratchiness that was in his throat. "Uh, I can patch us through to Toast." Phil nodded wordlessly, and Wilbur spun around again, needing to press the button twice because he missed the transmission button. "This is Lieutenant Wilbur Soot of the *L'manburg* contacting you, Vice Admiral."

› *This is Vice Admiral Toast speaking to you, Lieutenant. I was told this was an emergency?* ‹

"Y-yes," he said, trying—and failing—to keep his voice steady. "The Survival Strategies field trip—" Wilbur closed his eyes and took a small breath. He startled slightly as he felt a hand on his shoulder and glanced up to see Techno's neutral face staring at him. If he didn't know Techno as well as he did, then he would have been confused, but Wilbur gave a watery smile back and calmed himself down. "—it didn't take the correct path, and now we've lost contact."

There was a bit of silence.

› *What do you mean, you've 'lost contact'?* ‹

He flinched slightly. "Tommy had an implanted tracker."

› *That's illegal.* ‹

"He knew about it!"

› *Under Galactic Rebellion jurisdiction, it is still illegal.* ‹

Wilbur threw up his hands. "Fine! Punish us or fucking *whatever*—can we have permission to follow the trail until the end?" He heard the desperation in his voice.

"Wil," Phil said warningly. Wilbur sniffed loudly and glared at him.

› *You may not like what you see at the end of that trail.* ‹

"It's our family there," he said through gritted teeth. "Drista, Lani, Tommy..."

› *Your navigator is probably listening to this, right?* ‹

Techno spoke up. "I'm here."

》 *Forward the path to Command, so if you guys go mysteriously missing, we know where you've gone. Other than that, you have my blessing.* ‹

"Thanks, Admiral," Wilbur said weakly, and turned off the transmission. Techno had his datapad out and was tapping a few things with his fingers.

"Done," the half-Piglin grunted after a moment.

"This is Arachnid territory," Phil warned. "Wilbur, I need you to do a ship-wide transmission explaining what we are about to do."

He nodded coolly, switching on his mic and clearing his throat loudly as Dream readied the ship for warp, and Techno walked over to his desk and sat down. Tubbo had calmed down, some; his sniffles were gone, but he still clutched Ranboo like a lifeline.

He realized, blearily, that Purpled was crying.

"This is your Chief Communications Officer speaking."

He was overreacting, right? Tommy could still be alive. Drista could be alive. Lani could be alive.

"I am making his announcement on the unexpected journey we are about to make in the next few minutes."

He was suddenly glad of Phil's call to an emergency simulation—all the crew members were aboard the ship.

"Recently, we have received news that the taxi vessel that was transporting Drista Taken, Lani Underscore, and Tommy Innes has been compromised—" Well, it was close enough. "—as well as the other children aboard it. It also was going straight into Arachnid territory instead of the planet it was supposed to turn towards—Bree'lysn."

They were alive. They had to be.

"The Vice-Admiral informed us that it was fine to follow the path of the ship before contact was lost, and so under the blessing of the Galactic Rebellion, we will be doing so. I am sorry for the brief warning about this mission—it was unplanned for all of us. If you have any questions, please message my datapad. If you wish to disembark before we leave—because this *is* Arachnid territory, and an unexpected mission at that—please do so. We launch in t-minus five minutes."

Wilbur took his finger off the open mic and let out a huge breath. Saying things like that—while remaining professional—had been immensely difficult.

No, Tommy and Lani and Drista were okay. They had to be.

"Kristin messaged me," Phil said suddenly. "She asked what happened." Wilbur frowned as the Elytrian closed his eyes.

"Sometimes, it's easy to forget you have literal telepathic communication with your wife," Ranboo pointed out. Phil smiled at him.

"She's with Niki," he explained. "They're...coping."

"Are they?" Wilbur muttered, glancing at the many messages coming through on his datapad. Most of them were reassuring ones and questions about what had happened—not a single one was leaving. He saw Bad's words of expression about his patient—Tommy—and George was asking about Drista and Ponk about Lani—and he looked over his shoulder and he saw Purpled with pale lips, but an engaged expression and Tubbo and Ranboo were sitting side by side at the Operations desk; the Enderian having conjured a chair from God knew where.

"Ready for warp, captain," Dream said loudly, silencing the small murmurs in the room. Wilbur swallowed. "Warp six." The fastest warp they had—it would diminish their cores quickly. "It will take approximately forty-seven minutes to reach the last-known position of the tracker."

"Copy that," Phil said. "Wil, any disembarkers?"

"Not a single one," he said, pride radiating from his voice. Phil smiled solemnly.

"Punch it, Dream."

We'll find them, Wilbur swore to himself. *They are still alive.*

Please be alive, Tommy.

"You need to choose a First Officer," Hafu told him as she flicked the controls to ready them for warp.

Toast sighed and rubbed his face, glancing towards the empty desk that Sykkuno had once sat at.
"Just a little bit longer."

"I *get* that you're the Vice Admiral, but we're going to need one when we start this five-year mission in four months," his helmsman said sternly.

"Yeah, but that's in like...four months."

"Toast—"

"Hafu," he said warningly, and the Shulker shut her mouth. "I promise you, when we take off into the unknown in four months, those two positions will be filled."

"Good," Hafu said, her face softening. "I worry for you sometimes, Toast."

"You shouldn't," he said, a playful smile coming to his lips. "Worry about Tina. Hey! Tina!" The Feline looked up, startled. "You have your notes?"

"Yes, captain," Tina sighed, adjusting her orange and green hat that hid her ears. His heart panged slightly for her—she was new; he'd met her three years ago, barely a month after he'd disbanded the crew, and Command had wanted to get rid of her from Fleet school because of her poor memory. She only *had* a poor memory because she'd gotten jumped and had hit her head against some bricks, scarring her ears in the process. Felines were very proud people. Still, no matter how many times Toast told her that nobody would judge her aboard the *Mira*, she kept the carrot-like hat on.

He looked to his left, where Corpse sat, mumbling some words in another language—Merlish, this time? The Phantom looked up at him and gave a weak smile, and Toast nodded back at the Chief Communications Officer.

Some things never changed.

Hafu would always be his helmsman. Corpse would always be his Chief Communications Officer. Tina was a newer addition, but everyone enjoyed her presence aboard the *Mira*, never making fun of her memory except in a way that she would take it well. Pokimane sat tapping through the star maps; face furrowed deep in concentration.

"Sir?"

Toast looked up to see eup—or the man's nickname, anyway; technically his Elytrian name was .
"Hmm?"

"Fundy messaged me." Ah, that would be the Feline transport engineer aboard the *L'manburg*.
"D'you think that the kids will be okay?"

"*What?*" Hafu demanded. "The kids are gone?" Poki and Tina looked up sharply.

Toast winced. "I meant to tell you. The ones that were still in school went on that Survival Strategies field trip, and it went in the wrong direction, and the—illegal, may I add—tracker that Tommy Innes had was destroyed. His crew found out, so they contacted me for permission to follow the trail."

"That's the Avian," Corpse spoke up. "Tommy."

Toast nodded. "As well as Tubbo's sister, Lani, and Dream's younger sister as well, Drista. They were on the taxi too."

Hafu hissed. "Lani's a sweet kid. I hope they're all okay." Shulkers were rare, and everyone knew that Lani and Tubbo had both met Hafu briefly at the school because they were the same race. Based on Hafu's words about the older, Toast would have snatched him up if Philza hadn't gotten his greedy hands on the Shulker first.

So he nodded, but didn't respond. Something told him that the warning he had given Wilbur was genuine—they weren't going to like what they would see at the end of the journey.

Imposters & Crewmates

Chapter Notes

YAY FOR ART!

[Here](#) is some fantabulous art created by [Liz](#). Not a scene in the Children's Rebellion, but one in Star Trek that greatly parallels it!

[And here](#) is another character design of our one and only C.M.O Niki Nihachu, done by [Astro](#). Absolutely gorgeous!

[Rt_nique](#) IS SO FUCKING POGGERS and made the scene of Tommy and Sniff talking on the Golden Gate bridge [here](#). You know, before everything went terribly wrong.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*"And those who were seen
dancing were thought to be
insane by those who could not
hear the music."*

- Friedrich Nietzsche

"Polus," Rae said, spreading her hands as they walked across the top of the canyon, nearing a small mountain—literally the only mountain for miles; though the green forest—more blue than green, he noticed from a distance—was about a mile past it. "What we've called our home for—" she glanced at Sykkuno. "Three years?"

"Something like that."

"The air seems breathable," Lani noted, because Drista was still pissy for some unknown reason. "I'm surprised it's not colonized. Or bearing some form of sentient life."

"It seems to be like the other hundreds of small, uninhabited, low-oil bearing planets in the galaxy," Rae shrugged. "Except...it isn't." They rounded the foot of the mountain, and Tommy felt his jaw drop as he stopped in place and stared up at massive stone-built columns that gave way to an entrance carved into the red mountain rock, nestled into one of the many dips and nooks. The stone steps were crumbling, the pillars bearing cracks, but it stood firm and didn't seem like it was breaking anytime soon.

"How *old* is that?" Drista demanded.

"I'm not an archeologist, nor a geologist," Sykkuno said slowly. "But uh—older than the destruction of Avia, is my guess."

Older than three centuries, then. Not so old, but old enough that he questioned who had left it here.

"There aren't any bodies," Rae said. "It's like—there are no spaceships, no evidence of them being able to *leave* the planet, but there are no bones. All we know of them are buildings like this that litter the planet." She hesitated. "And, well, I say them because clearly, people colonized it. A long time ago."

Stepping onto the steps made Tommy hold his breath as if something were waiting to happen. Grass grew in the cracks, and he idly watched them wave in the night wind as Rae led them through an entrance into a vast domed arched ceiling—he couldn't quite see the entire ceiling; it was too dim, but he could see the beginning of it from where Rae was holding a lantern up into the darkness.

"What is this place?" Lani breathed out.

"My guess?" Rae shrugged. "Probably a religious site. It seems like that, anyway." She walked over to the side wall, illuminating a small entrance with some sort of blanket covering it. "Come on. This is where we've stayed."

"For like two and a half years," Sykkuno added, and Tommy smiled as he brushed the blanket—handwoven door?—aside to reveal a room that had two doorways leading out, one that led to what was clearly a bedroom and the other with another handwoven mat hanging over the entrance.

"You can put your stuff down on the hooks," Sykkuno said kindly as Rae walked over to the wall and lit a small match against some kind of stone. Tommy watched as it sparked, and the Avian lit the candle sconce, walking along the wall to light the other ones. He swung the bag off of his shoulder and hung it on one of the hand-carved wooden hooks, taking a second to admire them.

Drista clutched her bag, narrowing her eyes untrustingly on Sykkuno, who smiled at her patiently as he sat down on a mat on the ground. Rae didn't seem to notice the Human's glare as she blew out the match and spun around.

"Drista," Tommy murmured, and the girl scoffed but hung her bag on one of the hooks. Lani frowned, and Tommy watched as the blankets appeared one-by-one in her hands, and the girl set them down on the ground.

"Where did you get those?" Rae asked suddenly, and Tommy jumped slightly.

"What?" Lani asked, glancing down at the small pile of rations she now held in her palms.

"That," Rae said. "You didn't have a bag."

"Uh—I'm a Shulker," Lani said.

Rae's eyes were wide, and she squealed loudly. "Oh my God! That's so cool!" Drista stiffened slightly as she sat down across Sykkuno on another woven mat in front of the carved table—it was more a block of stone with a slab of wood over it. "Have you met Hafu?"

"...yeah," Lani said. "She's cool." She sat down next to Drista, and Tommy sighed and took the initiative to sit down next to Sykkuno. "You know her?"

"Yeah," Rae blinked. "She was on my ship."

The pieces collided together so fast that Tommy gasped loudly, like dots in a children's book with a marker. He stuttered, pointing between Sykkuno and Rae, finally deducing why they were here and who they were. "You—he—*what?*"

"Uh..." Sykkuno said, frowning slightly. "You good, Tommy?"

He swallowed. "Yeah—um. You're from the crew of the *Mira*."

"You know our ship!" Rae said excitedly.

"Wait—*Valkyrae* and *Sykkuno*," Drista said, clearly connecting the same dots that Tommy had. "You guys are Avians? Wait, you guys aren't on some secret mission?"

"...no," Rae said slowly, her hands tightening around the box of matches. Sykkuno rested a hand on her forearm, and she straightened, smiling. "Is that what Command told you?"

"Yes," Tommy said, before Drista or Lani could answer. "That's what they told the public. That way, nobody would know that shape-changing aliens would exist."

"I'm not a shape-changing alien," Rae said indignantly.

"You could be," Drista muttered.

"No," Tommy scoffed. "Fuckin'—imposters or whatever they're called—can't copy racial abilities." Drista's fists unclenched slightly at that realization.

"They can copy memories, though," Sykkuno muttered. "And mannerisms. Learned that one the hard way."

"What?" Lani said, confused. "What are we talking about?"

"Yeah, that makes sense," Rae said, slightly mournfully.

"Your crew thinks you're dead," Tommy said.

"I figured as much," Sykkuno sighed. "The navigation screens were broken when we were ejected from our ship. I don't think they could have found us if they wanted to."

"What are you *talking* about?" Drista demanded.

"The *Mira* was attacked by aliens shortly before we returned to Terra," Sykkuno said patiently. "They took the place of two of our crewmates and knew their memories, their ideas, their personality...everything was the same, except they planned to kill the rest of the crew and take over the ship." He lifted his chin slightly. "We were ejected because we were thought to be the...imposters."

"How do we know that you're *not*?" Drista demanded.

"Because they found the real ones," Tommy interrupted. Rae and Sykkuno looked at him. "Steve and D.K."

"May their souls rest among the stars," Rae said sadly. "After a few months of notetaking, Sykkuno and I figured it out too. Of course, we also knew that it was a bit late for us to call an emergency meeting."

"May their souls rest among the stars," Sykkuno echoed. Drista furrowed her brows, and Lani, who had some sense of decorum, inclined her head slightly. "How do you know this, Tommy, if it's classified from the public?"

"Toast told me."

"Oh, thank goodness Toast survived," Rae said, her voice filled with relief. "How did he take it?"

Drista snorted. "He must've fucking taken it poorly because he resigned, and the *Mira* was put out of commission."

"*What?*" Rae demanded. "He did—what?"

"He stopped being a captain," Lani shrugged. "He was also promoted to Vice-Admiral—but he stopped being the captain—I—uh, I suppose he blames himself for your presumed deaths."

"He did what he had to do," Rae said firmly.

"Still, in his eyes, he killed you," Tommy pointed out.

"I can't believe the *Mira* is out of commission," Sykkuno said sadly. "I loved that ship."

"Well," Tommy said. "It's not *anymore*. They recommissioned it recently." Rae and Sykkuno both perked up. "One of their first missions was to rescue my ship from where Arachnids were attacking it."

"You got attacked by *Arachnids*?"

"...yeah," he said, after a moment of silence. "Apparently, they wanted a prisoner aboard the ship, but I don't fucking buy that."

"Tommy—" Drista started.

"Oh, come *on*," he said. "You think they wouldn't come after me?"

"Why would the Arachnids go after a kid?" Sykkuno asked softly.

Tommy glanced at him. "Many reasons. I dunno. They hate me. It was supposed to be a track meet, but instead, it ended badly." He waved it off. "Anyway, the *Mira* saved mostly everyone from dying." He, Lani, and Drista all flinched at the 'mostly'. "So yeah, it was recommissioned."

"And you three are students at Fleet school?" Rae asked them, eyebrows furrowing.

"Yes," Tommy answered.

"No," Drista snapped.

"Sort of," Lani said.

"That certainly answers a lot," the Avian female said, raising an eyebrow. "Clearly, you're part of the track team—" she pointed at Tommy. "—and you guys said something about a field trip?"

"Finals," Lani corrected. "For Survival Strategies."

"Yeah, but our teacher is a fucking *bitch*," Drista complained, and Sykkuno looked at her, probably surprised at her foul language. "She was being racist and shit, so I called her by her first name, and then she pulled a *gun* on me. So then she crushed the tracker in Tommy's arm, and we were ejected here."

"That's...a lot to unpack," Rae said slowly. "Trackers? Aren't they illegal?"

"Yeah, but the C.M.O on the *L'manburg* likes putting me through pain," Tommy explained. Rae frowned at him, concern pulsing through the bond in his head.

"Tommy's exaggerating," Lani said quickly. "He gets into a lot of trouble."

"Oh," Rae said, amusement evident on her face. "Is that so?"

"Yeah," Lani said with a slight laugh as Tommy huffed. "He died like twenty times in the first week we met him."

"That's an exaggeration."

"Not really," Drista said.

"Yeah, I'll ask about that later," Rae said. "Are you guys students or not?"

"We are, sort of," Lani responded. "But I'm also a junior officer, and so is Drista." Rae frowned. "I'm Tubbo's sister, maybe you've—"

"Oh!" Sykkuno said. "I've heard of him! He graduated at a young age, right?"

"Yep," Drista said. "And our guardians are aboard the *L'manburg*, so the Vice-Admiral lets us spend some time on there as long as we come back for classes."

"They're never gonna let me aboard a spaceship alone again," Tommy groaned in realization.

"For good reason," Lani said. "The three times—wait, four—you were aboard a spaceship alone, you nearly got killed by an army of Arachnid fighters—"

"I was escaping from a prison."

"—you blew up a warship—"

"They deserved it."

"—your ship was attacked by Arachnids—" Tommy winced, staying silent as he crossed his arms. "—and now you're on an uninhabited planet with two Avians that just somehow also were ejected like three years ago."

"Basically," he sighed. "Yeah, that about covers it."

Rae whistled. "I'm surprised your parents aren't more protective."

"Sam is dead," he snapped. "And Clara died long before that."

"Sorry," Rae said after a moment. "That was tactless on my part. I forgot that you were his son."

"Yeah, but Tommy doesn't listen to the adult figures in his life either," Drista added.

"That's because the last one I listened to killed three thousand children!" he said.

Dead silence.

"...what?" Sykkuno said hoarsely.

"Nothing," he snapped.

"It doesn't seem like nothing," Rae said cautiously. "It sounds like something happened while we were gone."

"It's nothing," he said again, and Lani gave him a worried look. Drista had a neutral expression on her face, but there was anger behind it that surprised him. Why was she angry?

"We'll talk more in the morning," Sykkuno said, ending the conversation. "I'm sure you guys have been walking for a long time, and that's never good for your legs." He pointed to one of the doorways. "That's the bedroom—you can take your blankets. We don't have mattresses, but you can lay the blankets on the floor mats. It's doesn't ever get cold enough during the dry season to need a covering at night."

Drista eyed them distrustfully, and Tommy sighed. Lani picked up the blankets and carried them over to the room, where only a single candle was lit in one of the natural stone alcoves of the wall, clearly used. Tommy helped the Shulker lay out three of the blankets in squares, double folded over for more padding. Sykunno was right—it wasn't cold enough to need covering, though Tommy was wary about sleeping.

Despite the medication that Niki had been giving him, he needed to take that every day in order for it to work. And yeah—yeah, he hadn't taken it in about fourteen hours...it was on the ship, in his overnight bag. Tommy rubbed his eyes, readying himself for a night of nightmares and restless sleep.

"Where's Drista?" Lani asked sleepily, already lying down. She was already tired from the walk.

"I'll get here," he sighed, walking back into the main room. Sykkuno and Rae were talking in hushed whispers, but looked up when he saw them.

"Your friend went to go sit on the steps," Rae said, summoning a smile.

"Okay," he said, walking to the entrance and pausing. "Wait—how do you guys get your food? You know, being vegetarian?"

"We have a garden," Sykunno explained brightly. "In the forest. There's a fire pit in the other room, and a waterfall below the nave." He ran a hand through his hair, thinking. "I think we can get meat for your friends—uh, Shulkers eat meat, right?" Rae and Tommy both nodded. "Yeah. R-right. And—the angry girl? Drista. She's Human."

"I don't think she likes that," Rae noted softly, and Tommy frowned at her.

"Thanks for your hospitality," he said genuinely. "Sorry about Drista."

"Well," Rae said slowly. "I'd be mad too if I was tossed onto a planet as a teenager. At least Toast gave us materials just in case we weren't imposter aliens."

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. Yeah, he was *definitely* chopping like three inches off if he got back. *When* he got back. Because he was definitely going back.

Tommy walked out into what Sykkuno had called a nave—the religious hall—and to the entrance, where a blonde-haired girl sat on the steps, a frown on her face and the wind blowing through her braided hair. He sat down next to her, reaching down to pick at a weed that was growing through the cracks of the red stone.

"What are you doing here, Tommy?" Drista said, her voice full of wariness.

"Making sure you didn't get eaten by the wolf things," he said lightly. "The, uh—r'kylush ty'lim'en."

"Didn't you hear *Rae* on the way here," the Human said, chucking a rock at the open canyon plain that they faced. Tommy could see the beginning of a sunrise on the horizon, the blues washing away to gold and red and brilliant orange. "They don't come near the forest. They like the shade of the canyons during the day."

"You sound..." he trailed off. "Tense."

"I'm fine."

"Now you sound like me," he teased, poking her shoulder.

Drista heaved a heavy sigh, leaning on the backs of her palms. "It's just—you found other Avians, Tommy. And Avians—Avians stay in flocks."

"Oh," he said softly. "You think that if we get rescued, I'm going to leave."

"Of course," Drista snapped. "I mean—I don't know why I'm mad. It makes sense. You and Rae have that stupid bond now—"

"It was an accident."

"—Whether it was an accident or not doesn't *matter*, merely that you still have one," the Human said. "You can feel her emotions or some shit."

Well, not quite, Tommy thought, but he bit his tongue to keep from responding.

"Look, I *get* it. I shouldn't be mad. They're Avians. You're practically the last of your kind. You deserve to form a flock, or however you do it with Sykkuno and Rae. I just..." Drista sighed again. "I can't bring myself to like them for taking you away."

"You think I'm going to leave?" he said dubiously. "Just like that?"

"Well, no," Drista admitted. "I think we'll be rescued first, and then you'll probably join the *Mira* as a co-pilot or an Ensign or something—it's not like I won't *see* you."

"No!" he snapped, so suddenly that Drista jumped. "That's not—I don't plan to leave the *L'manburg* at all, Drista!" And maybe he surprised himself in saying that. Maybe he did.

"What?" the girl frowned. "But—Avians."

"Yes," he said shortly, raising his chin and staring at the cotton candy clouds that now peppered the sky, the stars fading out. He couldn't even recognize any constellations that Wilbur had taught him from Terra—they were in a completely different area of the galaxy. "They are Avians. But our race is dead, Drista. Don't you understand? Even if it were just the four of us—Rae, Sykkuno, me, and Chroma—our race is *gone*. Whether it's this generation or the next matters not—we are *gone*. We are not like the Shulkers—they at least number in the thousands, which, yeah, I'll give you, still makes them endangered—but. We are *nothing*. We are gone in a century—I am not willing to give up living life to continue my race for two more generations of us before we fade."

"But you're so powerful," Drista whispered. "You could save the galaxy."

"Then I'll do it in this lifetime," he said simply. "However short it may be. We'll stop the war—or at least *try*. Drista, you're my friend. Lani is my friend. You don't think Sykkuno and Rae realize that

our race is as good as extinct?" He scratched his shoulder as the green-eyed girl stared at him, sorrowfulness behind her eyes. "They said it themselves. They're *friends*, not in a relationship."

"So...the Avians will be gone?"

"Yes," he said. "Oh, I'll probably give up my DNA to the labs so that if they ever figure out a way to grow a child, they can continue the race—but other than that...there are four of us, Drista. And only one of us is a woman, and I'm a kid, and the other is evil. Toast said there were more...but what if there weren't?" He tugged his knees to his chest. "What if it was just us, in a galaxy full of war?"

"So you admit defeat."

"There is *nothing* we can do," he said. "Nothing at all. When I get married—you know, if I survive and find a woman—she won't be an Avian, and my bloodline will retain hybridization and then...and then nothing, eventually."

"You've accepted this," Drista said.

"I accepted this the moment that I realized that I did not know any more Avians, that Chroma was telling the truth when he said he did not know any more either," Tommy corrected. "We may be powerful, Drista, but we are few, and we are nothing."

"You are not nothing to me," Drista said softly. "You are my friend." She hesitated. "For as long as we live, you will be my friend."

"Yeah, hopefully, that's more than a few years," Tommy snorted.

Drista smirked into the beginning of the sunrise, brushing her hair out of her eyes. "I hate being useless," she admitted softly.

"What—" he said. "You're not useless."

"I'm Human."

"So?" he demanded. "That doesn't make you useless."

"You and Lani and like *everyone* I know has cool powers," Drista snapped. "It's like...magic."

"Oh?" he said, a touch angrily, raising an eyebrow. "And you think that because I'm rare makes me *powerful*?"

"You're not a good example," Drista said, voice softening. "I see why the Avians were so secretive." She snorted. "And why they stayed out of the fucking war."

"I don't agree with my ancestors," Tommy said lightly. "But you are not useless as a Human. Terra is the *heart* of the Galactic Rebellion, the literal birthplace of Fleet school!"

"Yeah, yet somehow everyone is racist to Humans on Terra," Drista pointed out.

"That's just systematic prejudice and a series of superiority complexes," Tommy said. "Drista—you don't think to Lani, *you* are magical?" Drista frowned at him. "Shulkers have naturally smaller lungs. Walking across the canyon tops made her exhausted, and you kept going at the same pace."

"I practiced."

"And if she practices twice what you do, she will never have one-fourth of the endurance you have," Tommy said, and Drista blinked her green eyes owlishly as she comprehended that.

"Humans and Felines have the greatest endurance *biologically*. Avians—I mean, sure, yeah, we can run faster, but you still have a better endurance than me from the moment you were born." He waved his hand through the air, the motion causing shadows to flicker across his eyes in the sunrise. "And—speaking of Avians! I'm a *vegetarian*! I can't eat meat, and you are an omnivore! Biologically, *I can't eat meat*—my stomach can't accept foreign foods, and for Enderians, they gotta eat chorus fruit with their meals; otherwise, they don't get the proper ender nutrients—and Merlings are pescetarians." He poked Drista's stomach, and the girl slapped his hand away. "Hell,

Ranboo gets *memory loss* when he doesn't eat chorus fruit with his meals, and we know how well that turned out."

"Still—"

"They can't even drink water!" Tommy continued, overriding her. "Neither can Blazeborns, for that matter—they gotta drink their own thing, whatever it is called." Drista subsided into silence, eyebrows furrowing as she honestly considered this. "Phantoms have to wear special sunscreen in special types of the sun; otherwise, they burn like vampires from those cringey romance novels do. They have to eat *twice* the amount we do to maintain their Phantom state, and they don't have the toughness that you or I do." He shook his head. "Elytrians aren't as strong as you. Felines don't like water. Kitsunes are prone to those heat-things, plus they don't have very many women."

"I don't..." Drista said, trailing off. "I never thought of it like that."

"You may not think you're powerful," Tommy said softly. "But to the other races, Humans are magical. To me, you are magical. You and Purpled and Punz and Ponk and Kristin and Quackity and Dream and all the other Humans—you are magical." He laughed softly. "Or as magical as one can be in a universe of spaceships and stars."

"No," Purpled whispered, his hands shaking slightly as he clutched into the closest thing—the back of the captain's chair, staring with wide eyes at the mess in front of him. "No, no, no..."

It was a graveyard. It was everything, and it was nothing, and it was his emotional demise. Tubbo let out a slight shrieking noise that turned into a strangled sound, and Ranboo let out a mourning creak that used vocal cords that Purpled didn't have.

It was empty space, and it was floating metal. It was the remains of bodies and a ship and pieces long gone and scorched minerals. It was ice, and it was death.

"No..." Wilbur echoed, face paler than usual despite his Phantom race.

Purpled felt his world come to a startling halt as he beheld the remains of a ship that had entered Arachnid territory and never gotten further than that. Pieces drifted around—only some; others lost to the void of space. There were no planets around for light years—everything and *nothing* and an answer all at once.

"You're sure this is where the path ends?" Phil snapped, all business.

"I..." Dream trailed off, leaning back and his hands shaking. "Yeah...um...Drista...?" His sentence curled into a pitful question as his voice cracked.

"Lani," Tubbo breathed out. "*Lani*, please..."

"Tommy," Purpled said numbly.

"This can't be the right ship!" Ranboo said hotly. "No—*no*!"

"It is," Dream said softly, and Purpled noticed tears on his face as he stared at the tomb of his sister. Space, and nothing more. "The remains of the tracker lead...here." He let out a strangled laugh, sounding nothing like his usual tea kettle self. "They're...dead?"

"No, no, *no* !" Tubbo said, sobbing. "Please, no—they're not dead, she's not dead!"

"Tommy," Purpled whispered, blinking as he felt the wetness hit his eyes. He'd already lost his friend once—and after everything they went through, this is how he died? *This* is how he died? Not in a fight, not in a heroic moment—in a spaceship explosion that he couldn't control? "There's gotta—we've gotta find the bodies—"

"There won't be any, mate," Phil said softly, standing up. Wilbur was sitting, Techno behind him, both crewmates staring out the window in shock. "It's been too long, and the initial explosion will have vaporized—"

"IT'S YOUR FAULT!" he howled, cutting the captain off as he shouted his anger to the stars.
"YOU—YOU SIGNED IT OFF—YOU—!"

He didn't blame Phil.

"Shh," Phil said, not sounding irate at all as Purpled closed his eyes and sobbed loudly, feeling the warmth of the feathers amidst the cold that he felt internally. "Shh."

He collapsed against the older man, listening as Tubbo screamed his anger that Ranboo could barely hold back, and Dream let his silent tears trickle down upon the controls, gleaming in the starlight. Wilbur was crying too—and Techno just barely in the corners of his eyes, though he looked more rage-filled than sad.

"No," he whispered, in a voice so broken and lonely and filled with history. "No, he can't be gone...please, don't be gone."

All the years, all the songs upon golden grass, all the pain of living and then the hole in his heart getting filled so briefly—the laughter that he had heard, the regret he had for yelling, and anger he held for Tommy—all of it was for *nothing*. Years and years of shared experience—shattered to pieces.

Distantly, he could hear two brothers crying for sisters lost. Distantly, he was grabbing at his captain's uniform with pale and shaky hands, and he thought maybe he was screaming—for a death that had shaken his world—their worlds.

"They're not dead," he whispered, and he didn't know if he believed that.

Three more people lost to the universe.

» As of Stardate 98955.23, Tommy Innes, Lani Underscore, and Drista WasTaken were marked as Missing Persons by Wilbur Soot, a Lieutenant aboard the *L'manburg*. This report

was signed off by Commander Technoblade and Captain Philza Minecraft. End of transmission. «

» As of Stardate 98955.29, their cases have been marked as Deceased, along with twenty-five other students aboard their vessel. This report was signed off by Captain Philza Minecraft on symposia of, quote, "Out of necessity and etiquette and Galactic Rebellion regulations, I have been forced to sign off a form that states half the children of our ship have been killed. Some of us do not believe them to be truly gone." End of transmission. «

Chapter End Notes

[Here](#) is a tribute to Lih'zoreon Dayquan done by [Liz](#) herself. She's dead.

The Amigops

Chapter Notes

twitter made me do this

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*"Everyone calls me a monster, but the only
reason I gave in to it was so I could save you."*

When Tommy woke up the following day, he had a headache—not to mention he'd only slept for two hours because of the low altitude. He groaned quietly, throwing an arm over his face and tried to will away the headache again.

"It's too early," Drista muttered under her breath, apparently having half-awoken from his shuffling. "Go 'way, Dream."

"Dream's not here," he said, louder, and smashing any dreams the fifteen-year-old girl had of this being a nightmare.

Drista shot up with a small gasp, and Tommy muffled a laugh at the atrocious hairdo that she'd somehow managed to obtain overnight. "Wha—oh," she said, realizing where they were. The candle had burned away—or been put out, he wasn't quite sure—and the only light in the room was the one filtering under the curtain.

Tommy got up and stretched, wincing at the soreness in both his back and his skull. Drista reached over and shook Lani, the Shulker flapping her arm to ward off the other girl and muttering something about five more minutes. Tommy snickered when Drista grabbed the Shulker's arm and dragged her out of bed.

"I am *not* going out into the other room alone," the Human growled as Lani shot up with a pained yell, rubbing her arm.

"I'm here," Tommy said warily.

"You don't count. You're not on my side."

"Sides—you know what?" Tommy threw up his hands. "Whatever. He swept aside the curtain and blinked, glancing to the side to dispel the pain that came from the sheer amount of light pouring into the room.

Hmm.

How long had it been since he'd awoken in a room on a planet that didn't include Terra?

Admittedly, a very long time.

Tommy yelled out in surprise as Sykkuno popped into existence in front of him—not really, but the Avian had still surprised him. "Holy *fucking* shit," he said, swearing like a sailor. Outside of his therapy appointments, his therapist would have said *language*.

His heart panged for the crew that had slowly become his family.

"Good morning, Tommy!" Sykkuno said brightly.

Tommy frowned at the piece of metal the Avian was holding. "Isn't that a part from the escape pod?" he said bluntly, recognizing the serial number on the side of it.

"Uh, yeah!" Sykkuno said, blinking. "We've found that we can finish the communication signaler with the pieces from your pod!"

"...what?" Drista said, her voice tired.

"You think we were just sitting around making gardens and weaving mats for the past two and a half years?" Valkyrae said, kindly, as she walked into the room. She had a bit of grime on her face, and her hair was tied back, and she had a pair of electrical pliers in the other hand.

"Well—no," Drista spluttered. "But..."

"There wasn't enough left of our pod to create a signal," Rae said politely. "But we've found that with yours, we can finally do it."

"This is dead space, though," Tommy said. "Nobody will be receiving our message."

"It's not about the message, but the signal," Rae told him, and Tommy was reminded of his own words to Kristin on Falir IV. "If we can send it out—no words, just a pulse—someone will hear it."

"Arachnids," Lani said. A single word.

"I know," Sykkuno said. "We know." He glanced at the Avian woman, who smiled. "But—if it's the Arachnids that come, it's them who come."

Drista sniffed. "I would rather be trapped by them than be trapped on this godforsaken planet," she muttered.

"I don't know about that," Tommy muttered, cringing slightly.

Rae frowned at him. "Do you have experience with that?" she asked kindly. "With Arachnids?"

Tommy bit his lip until he felt the blood roll down his face and the pain in his lower jaw. Lani elbowed him harshly, and Tommy blinked. "Um..." he said. "You could say that." Drista snorted loudly. "How'd you even get the ship parts?"

Rae frowned at him. "Sykkuno ran there earlier this morning," she said. "He's always been the better runner."

"That's like...a hundred miles!" Lani said.

"It's twenty-two miles, Lani," Sykkuno said, smiling, his hand covering his mouth. Tommy tilted his head—perhaps he was self-conscious of it. "Not far for an Avian."

"Tommy can't do that," Drista said bluntly.

Rae and Sykkuno both looked over at him. "You...can't?" Rae asked carefully.

"He passed out when he first tried to run," Lani said grimly. "Stopped breathing and—"

"You incited the Avian's Breath?" Sykkuno asked, cutting the young Shulker off.

"I...what?" he asked cautiously.

"The Avian's Breath," Rae said. "When you run, and you forget to breathe. It's...not a normal occurrence, and usually in those who have...mental health problems."

Tommy winced. "It's—it hasn't happened since," he said, as Drista and Lani both looked at him. "Ah—the next time I ran, it was fine. But even still, I cannot run a mile as you can. I never learned the techniques to, 'cause the *H.M.S Fran* was destroyed when I was ten."

"Ah," Rae said, understanding filling her eyes. "Sam's ship. I remember the day it was lost." She shook her head. "Sykkuno and I remember it very well."

"They said that the day that Avia fell, the remaining Avians felt as if a part of them died," Sykkuno offered up. "That they felt...more alone than they had ever been. I think...I think that we felt the

hundreds of Avians die that day as well."

He blinked back tears, remembering that tearing agony in his chest—he thought perhaps that it had been the breaking of the bonds, but it had persisted until the other escape pods had been destroyed into oblivion. Perhaps Rae and Sykkuno were onto something. "I'm sorry," he said truthfully. "My dad and my aunt tried to save them, but the escape pods..." his words caught in his throat. "They did not make it. Very few made it to the surface, and I believe it was the Piglins."

"Right," Drista said, snapping her fingers. "Techno was on that ship."

"Who is—never mind," Rae said, interrupting herself. "But shouldn't you have practiced...at least the stuff you knew? Even after your father died?"

Tommy closed his eyes, and Lani hissed slightly under her breath.

"Touchy subject," Drista said bluntly.

"I was in prison," he admitted. "I only got out of it a few months ago." He heard both girls mutter something indecipherable under their breaths—probably about his unwillingness to admit the whole truth—but in all honesty, he didn't give a fuck. Sure, Rae was now a bond-mate—and, by extension, Sykkuno—but he wouldn't say shit.

"Ah," Rae said, eyes softening. "I'm sorry, then." She tilted her head. "Do any of you know anything about engineering?"

Tommy tried to keep the pain off his face as a girl's face flashed in front of his vision, wiring and grease in her hands as she grumbled. He'd made fun of her as she'd lain sprawled across the grassy ground of the park, even while he struggled at writing an essay on aerodynamics. "I'm a pilot."

"Nurse," Lani said.

"Tactical officer," Drista grumbled. "I can help a bit. My brother is a huge nerd. I know stuff about computers—not so much raw wiring, though."

"Anything helps," Rae said. "We have the parts—I'm just not one hundred percent sure how to do it." She smiled sheepishly. "I'm better in combat."

"Ooh!" Drista said, perking up. "I remember! You're the C.S.O!"

"Yeah, and Sykkuno was the First Officer."

"However," the Avian man interrupted. "I do know a bit about coding. Before I chose the Command path, I wanted to be a transport engineer." He shrugged slightly as Tommy tilted his head curiously. "Then Toast asked me to be his First Officer, and it was scary and yet—I thought about it, and it was exactly what I'd wanted."

"To be the First Officer?" Lani asked curiously.

"To fly among the stars with friends," Sykkuno responded, and Rae shook her head and glanced up at the ceiling, a semi-hidden smirk on her face. "That's what I've always wanted."

"Not to do what you want?" Drista piped up.

"That *is* what I've wanted," the Avian responded kindly. "What I wish to do once more. It's not about the end, but the journey and the friends you make along the way." He tilted his head. "It's about how you turn your experiences—bad or not—into something that both defines you yet does not run your life." He waved his hand. "Perhaps, if this signal works, we will travel the stars once more. And I will always be scared that those aliens will come back—that Toast never finished them—but that does not mean that I do not wish to fly ever again. That I do not miss space as dearly as I miss home."

"Space is our home," Rae finished, a kind smile on her face. "No matter where we were born, or what happened to us in space, or what happened to us *because* of the vastness of the universe—space will be our home, with our friends, traveling and exploring—even through war and death."

"Home," Tommy murmured.

What was home to him?

Home wasn't an unknown space, an empty dorm room, or even a ship long slaughtered. Home wasn't a planet destroyed eons ago or a prison cell that he had come to know. Home certainly wasn't a planet of brown grass once golden with the faint scent of blood in the wind.

Home was a boy with magenta eyes and a heart of steel. Home was a boy with two-toned skin and a weak smile. Home had once lain in the hearts of his friends.

To him, home were these people and so much more—home was now a shorter brown-haired boy that played the piano with him and sat on the edge of a cliff; home was a tall man who ruffled his hair and explained to him the stars; home was a pink-haired man who played chess with him and laughed in a monotone voice as he struggled to win; home was the warm feathers of someone that was slowly becoming a father.

He realized, now, why when he hugged Wilbur, the Phantom smelled like nothing at all. Even Sykkuno had a faint scent—pine needles and sand—and Rae as well; in the moment, grease and cinnamon—but Wilbur had started to smell like nothing, like a familiar bedroom or your own clothes.

Wilbur smelled familiar. Tubbo was the same way, though he wasn't as overbearing as Wilbur, who often tackled Tommy in hugs when he wasn't paying attention, always one step behind, a worrying eye placed on him wherever he walked. Phil smelt faintly of Kristin, cherries, and smoke, and Techno smelled like blood and metal, though it wasn't too overbearing.

Home was with them—wasn't a place, or even the imaginations of a place—he would walk this universe with them if he wanted to, and *damned to all hells* he fucking did—he would follow them to the edge of the galaxy and back. Not because he had nowhere to go, but because he wanted to.

They were his home, now.

He wouldn't lose another one.

Tommy stared in surprise at the little plot of land that Sykkuno lead him and Lani to—Drista and Rae were finishing the signal. It was a garden, shaded by trees and a small stream could be heard trickling in the air.

Maybe he would go home again.

He never had any doubt they would live. Whether they would leave the planet? He had had his doubts for damn sure—Rae and Sykkuno being here was the dumbest fucking luck that had ever happened.

"I'm sorry about the lack of meat," Sykkuno offered up, scratching the back of his head. "We haven't needed to hunt in years."

"It's fine," Lani said, bending down and plucking at one of the red fruits that grew in a sort of leafy vine, supported by a collection of metal sticks in the ground.

Look, Tommy didn't know much about gardening.

"Huh," Lani said as she popped the fruit in her mouth. "Tomatoes."

"Yes," Sykkuno said sheepishly. "The survival pack was a long-term one. Toast was kind enough in that sense—he understood that if we weren't aliens, we would be here for a long time." He sighed. "If only the navigation system hadn't failed. We would have been out of here long ago."

"Tomatoes?" Tommy asked curiously.

"A common Terran fruit," Lani told him brightly. "I'm sure you've had it in your salad."

"I don't..." he trailed off. "I don't really look at what I'm eating. It's sort of a bad habit because of Pogtopia."

"What?" Sykkuno asked, and Tommy was startled, having forgotten that the other Avian was here. "Pogtopia? Isn't that a town in neutral space for restless children?" The Avian shook his head. "I'm pretty sure my parents threatened to send me there as a joke, like, ten years ago, back when it was first formed. It's always scared me."

"Good thing you didn't," Tommy murmured, and Lani reached out and gripped his hand tightly. He smiled at her with a shaky smile. "It didn't end well."

"Oh," Sykkuno said, blinking. "The colony failed?" He frowned. "Arachnids?"

"Greedy politicians, actually," Tommy corrected, lightly, trying to keep the tears from showing in his voice. His hands were sticky, and he realized that a tomato had found its way into his hand, and he'd crushed it. "Proud idiots who never called to aid until it was too late."

"And...you were part of this colony?" Sykkuno asked him.

"Yeah," Tommy said. "Until it failed."

"I am sorry you did not get proper schooling," Sykkuno said, and Tommy knew that Sykkuno did not *understand* why his breath hitched and his hands shook with an internal terror that he was hoping he had rid himself of. "At least it is better now, right?"

He smiled, and this one was genuine. "Yeah. Yeah, it's much better now." Tommy bent down and picked up a basket, giving a cursory glance over the vegetables. "Which one of these are Terran?"

"Hmm," Lani said. "Well, there's the tomatoes—ooh, I see lettuce and cabbage—are those *apples*?" Tommy followed her gaze to a small tree that bore mini purplish-red fruit.

Sykkuno smiled slightly. "No, but you could say that apples are a cousin of it." He waved his hand slightly, and Tommy watched as a slight breeze ruffled through the branches of the trees overhead. As they'd walked here—about a mile or two—the vegetation had grown closer and closer, and Tommy had never felt safer in his entire life.

An apple fell into the Avian's palm, and Lani elbowed Tommy harshly. "You need to learn how to do that," she hissed.

Tommy laughed, shoving the shorter girl slightly. "I honestly thought I could just do that around *my* body," he said truthfully. "And then I found that I could do it with other things."

Sykkuno stared at him for a second before tossing the apple to Lani, who caught it with a slight frown, rubbed a bit of dirt off on her shirt, and then took a crunchy bite. "You know," the Avian said. "Most people *can't* do what I just did. Rae can't. She's good at being able to control the air around her, though."

Tommy hummed thoughtfully. "It's weird meeting other Avians," he admitted. "I thought I was the last one left until I met—" he cut himself off. "Until I heard about Chroma, but fuck that guy. And then Toast told me that other Avians existed, but he didn't know their whereabouts."

Sykkuno paused from where he was standing on his tippy-toes to reach more apples. "Chroma?" Lani straightened abruptly, brown eyes narrowing on the Avian as her lips curled against her teeth.

"You missed a lot," the Shulker girl said in lieu of Tommy's silence. "Um, we talked about Pogtopia before...he was the leader, basically." She waved her hand. "Head of government, whatever. It doesn't matter." Tommy bit back the word *governor*, letting Lani speak. "There was...a virus, to say the least." She eyed Tommy. "And, uh—"

"He was too proud to call for aid, so all the children starved," Tommy interrupted. Sykkuno's eyes widened. "The grass turned brown under the red sun, and there were...executions." He hung his head slightly. "To um—to try to keep those alive that *deserved* it until there was a cure."

"There was never a cure, was there?" Sykkuno said carefully.

"No," he said. "Not until long after thousands had passed."

"Didn't you say that you were part of that colony until it had failed?"

Tommy had to give Sykkuno some credit. He was hoping that the Avian had forgotten. He flinched anyway. "Uh—yeah. I'm one of the survivors. Chroma is too. Fucking rat bastard escaped."

"How many?"

Tommy looked up at him. "What?"

"How many survivors are there—besides Chroma?" Sykkuno asked.

Tommy let out a low breath. "Three," he admitted, and he didn't like the silent horror that filled Sykkuno's eyes. Lani was thankfully silent. "Me, Purpled, and Ranboo. We all serve aboard the *L'manburg*."

"You're a kid."

"I'm seventeen," he corrected. "I was fifteen by the end. Purpled and Ranboo were as well."

"You were *children*."

He smiled, but it wasn't warm. "They do call it the *Children's* Rebellion," he said, and Lani winced. "Personally, I never named it that...but that's history, and I suppose I'm part of it, even though the articles never say my name."

"The...Children's Rebellion?" Sykkuno said slowly. "What's that?"

"It's uh—it's a stupid group my friends, and I started, a sort of rebellion against Chroma and the other curators," Tommy said. "We stole food. Looked for hidden warehouses. Protested at funerals. We have—well, we have a symbolic flag."

"It's in the historical hallway," Lani mentioned lightly. "Along with a list of names."

"Six stars," Tommy said. "Six names. Six people. Me, Alyssa, Foolish, Purpled, Grian, and Ranboo."

"What happened to—" Sykkuno cut himself off, and the world fell into silence.

"They died," Tommy said, after a bit of awkward silence. "They were publically executed, but in the end, I suppose they were sort of martyrs." He didn't mention that it was his fault that the other children had died that day.

"I am sorry for your loss," the other Avian said genuinely. "This Chroma guy does not sound like a good person."

"Understatement of the century," Lani muttered. Tommy scoffed.

"Three thousand, two hundred, and seventy children died," he said. "There three thousand, two hundred, and seventy-one names on the wall."

"One of them is yours," Sykkuno said, and it wasn't a question.

He nodded, and then paused. "Well, no." Lani frowned at him. "It's not my real name—it's the fake one I gave to Chroma and that the Arachnids in the Wasteland had me under. And uh—I painted over it a long time ago."

"I never noticed," Lani said truthfully.

"You wouldn't have," he said lightly, no malice behind his voice. "It's one name of thousands."

"Why are we here, Toast?" Pokimane asked as she brushed her brown hair out of her eyes and turned to face him. Hafu frowned at her in confusion. "Why do we follow this path?"

"It's a test flight," he told her.

"Sure," the Human replied. "But it's the same path that we took many years ago. We're lightyears from Command—it's been nearly two days of flight." Corpse glanced over his shoulder, deep black eyes making unreadable contact with Toast before he turned back to his station.

"We need to test the warp cores," he told her.

"That's not my point," Poki said patiently. "My point is that we could have gone to—to the Blazeborn home planet, or something. We're deep in neutral space right now."

"I know," he said.

"Why?" Hafu asked him.

"Because this is something we need to do," he told her honestly. "We lost Steve and D.K. here." Hafu looked down at the palms of her hand, sadness warring her features. They had been her friends, and it was her final word that had convinced Toast that those two were the imposters. "We lost—we lost Rae and Sykkuno because of a bad decision—*my* bad decision—"

"It's not your fault, Toast," Corpse said in his low voice, speaking up.

"It is, though," he said. "I don't want—I don't want any arguments about it right now, but...before we receive our first mission, I wanted this flight to be done. In all its finality."

"Do you think they're alive?" Tina spoke up. She'd never met them—D.K. had once been at her position, but she had heard the stories and knew the secrets that technically she shouldn't know. "Out there, somewhere?"

"They could be," Toast said honestly. "But...it's been three years. Wouldn't they have come back if they wanted to? There was a commlink for us in the escape pod." He rubbed his face. "Still, this is a journey that needs to be done."

"Toast—" Corpse interrupted.

"Corpse, please," he said. "Don't argue with me of this."

"No," the Phantom said. "It's...I got a pulse signal."

Toast blinked at him. "What?"

"We passed it in a burst of lightning, but I received a pulse of a signal," Corpse said patiently.

"Did we pass over—"

He didn't even have to finish his sentence before Poki replied. "No, no colonies or any inhabited planets in this area of the sector," she said, eyebrows furrowing as she scanned the star maps. "There's nothing here."

"Turn around," he said.

"It could be a trap," eup warned.

"Then raise the shields," he said, lifting an eyebrow. Tina nodded and scurried to do his unspoken command. "It is our duty to follow distress calls."

"It's not even a distress call," Corpse said awkwardly, as Hafu pulled them out of warp and turned the ship around. Poki murmured something to her, pointing at a speck among the star maps, and Hafu nodded as she typed in some coordinates and re-entered warp. "It's just..." he trailed off and pressed the button to activate the speakers. Toast winced as feedback filled the air, and Corpse hurriedly took his hand off the button. "...it's just that."

"Are you sure—"

"The signal is unlike anything I've ever seen," his Communications Officer said. "It's not Galactic. It's not Arachnid. It's not related to any species. It's either homemade...or something new."

"Pulling out of warp, captain," Hafu said clearly. Toast got to his feet to stare out the dash window as the stars stopped blurring.

It was a planet. A planet with small areas of greenery and pools of water around the equator and mostly made of deserts and canyons.

"Signal is definitely coming from here," Corpse announced.

"It's not on the star maps," Pokimane announced. "This planet doesn't exist—wait." Her hand paused. "Older records show it does. The newer ones don't." Tina leaned over and frowned, nodding slightly. "It's called Icarus-45HB."

"Sykkuno—" he started from force of habit, and the entire bridge fell into silence as he caught his mistake. "Uh. Tina. Any lifeforms?" He tried to ignore the confusion that Poki's words had sent him into. Why would a planet just be erased from existence?

"Nothing, Captain," the Feline said. "No recorded sentient life, but the air is breathable. The atmosphere is at ninety-three percent that Terra bears. Command has a footnote from thirty-seven years ago stating that it could possibly form sentient life in about four thousand years." Tina leaned back in her seat after her final words exited her mouth, looking puzzled. Poki was leaning over the star maps and muttering obscene things under her breath as she switched between one from two hundred and fifty years ago to one from two hundred and forty-nine years ago.

"Can you pinpoint the location, Corpse?" he said.

"Yes, Captain," Corpse replied.

"Received, loud and clear," Poki said, waving a hand and enlarging a portion of the planetary map—a small forest a mile away from a hilly peak in the middle of a canyon. "Do you want me to gather together a landing party?"

"I..." Toast trailed off. "Yes."

"Permission to join the landing party, sir?" Corpse asked suddenly.

"Sure," he said. "Any reason why?"

Corpse laughed. "Call it a hunch," he said, a smirk twisting at his lips as he stood up. "I'll comm Jack and Wol'fahb'yille," he said. "They'll ask for volunteers."

"Good," Toast said. Corpse started to head out. "Oh, and Corpse?" The Phantom looked back at him, confused. "If you find anything...and it's something you don't expect..."

"I know," he said. "I've been prepared for this, and this is more hope than any of us have ever had."

Chapter End Notes

don't worry im still uploading tomorrow

so they're not actually dead...again...(again)

Chapter Notes

second chapter within 12 hours. If you haven't read the first one go read it.

"As long as I have my friend,

I don't care."

- BadBoyHalo

"A ship is approaching," Rae said cautiously, poking her head in the doorway.

Tommy spat the green leaf out of his mouth.

"Ew," Drista said, wrinkling her nose at him. He ignored her in favor of scrambling to his feet and rushing past a slightly amused Rae outside, where Sykkuno was standing on the steps, staring up at the blue midday sky.

"Huh," the Avian said. "So the signal worked."

"You're so fucking nonchalant about that," he hissed, squinting and raising a hand to block the sunlight. Indeed, a shiny metal object seemed to be making its way towards the mountain the temple they'd called their home for four days was located at. "It could be an Arachnid ship."

"It doesn't look like an Arachnid ship," Drista said, squinting.

"I can't see that well," Lani complained, blinking harder, as if that would do anything. She had been in the main room, playing around with the heavy fiber that Rae and Sykkuno had used to weave the mats—though she hadn't had much success and refused to ask for help.

Drista smiled and pointed to her face. "Human eyes," she said, and Tommy lifted his eyebrow at her.

"Not so magical now, am I?" he said. Drista, of course, ignored him.

"Well," Rae sighed. "They see us. No point in moving." Her hand itched for the wooden staff that hung across her back—a weapon, Tommy knew, that she used in place of her Avian biology. Sykkuno's *was* in his hand, and though his grip was lax, Tommy knew that he knew how to use it. He'd seen Rae and Sykkuno practice—apparently, it was a pastime they had since they didn't have any books or anything of the sort.

Tommy drew his knife.

"Oh, yeah," Drista snorted. "As if that's gonna be any help against phasers."

He scowled. "Hey! This is for my sanity, not for actual usage." It made him feel safer, holding the small weapon. Less useless.

"Huh," Drista said, ignoring him entirely as she peered up at the vessel. "It's a Galactic ship."

About twenty seconds later, Tommy realized she was right—that the markings and the designations were nearly identical to that of one of the *L'manburg* transports he'd been in once, though there seemed to be slight modifications.

"Huh," Sykkuno said, suddenly, as the five of them watched the ship land on top of the canyon two hundred yards away from them. Rae relinquished her grip on her wooden staff. "Wow. That's a really extraordinary occurrence."

"Huh?" Tommy repeated stupidly.

"That's *Mira's* landing transport," Rae said, her voice slightly hollow. "Oh my *God*, that's our ship." Tommy squinted, but couldn't make out the lettering on the side of it, though it *was* of Galactic make.

"What the fuck are the chances of that?" Drista muttered.

"You're sure?" Lani asked nervously.

"Yeah, I can see the lettering," Drista answered before either Avian could. "Come on! Let's go meet them!"

"Drista—" Tommy started, but the girl had already taken off running, going out of the shade and into the hot sun. He glanced back at Rae and Sykkuno. "Uh—"

"Go on," Rae said, smiling nervously.

"Don't you want to come?"

"I, uh—I think we need a minute," Sykkuno responded, putting a hand on Rae's shoulder. Tentatively, Tommy opened his shields and felt the shockwaves of fear-astonishment-desperation-anger-love. He closed the shields before Valkyrae felt his prying mind, wincing slightly.

Drista was already halfway there, and Tommy sprinted after her, Lani coming a bit slower after a second of thought. His feet hit the sand, and he could feel the heat through the soles of his matted shoes as he ran. Sweat started to form on his brow, running in rivulets down the side of his face, and he could hear Lani puffing behind him. He wasn't running as fast as he could—far from it—but from the way that Drista slowed to a walk in the last ten yards, she was still apprehensive of the ship in front of her despite being the first one to read the Standard lettering.

The door slid open, and Tommy watched, knife still in hand, Lani slowing to a stop beside him.

It was a Kitsune that stepped out first; a Kitsune with brown hair that faded to blonde and the telltale markings across her cheeks, white ears twitching as she accumulated to the heat. Her eyes met Tommy's nearly instantly, and she tilted her head curiously. Tommy had never heard of her before—though, to be fair, he hadn't heard of most people.

The next person out was an Elytrian with dark green feathers that faded to lime and a careful ponytail in his hair. While the Kitsune didn't recognize the three of them, the Elytrian clearly recognized Lani, for the girl next to Tommy let out a hum of surprise, and the Elytrian took a step in her direction.

"Lani?" he said, sounding shocked.

"Jack!" the Shulker cried out, and yeah, it wasn't Jack *Manifold*. There were multiple Jacks, it seemed.

"We're saved!" Drista cheered. Tommy elbowed her, and the Human stuck out her tongue at him.

"Lani," the Kitsune said, an odd accent on her tongue as she tested the word out. "You're marked as deceased."

All three of them froze.

"What?" Tommy said.

"Your ship," the Elytrian called Jack explained as he stepped towards them cautiously. "The uh—the taxi. It was found destroyed. There were no survivors. We assumed you were aboard as well."

Tommy's heart plummeted.

Holy fuck, they were dead.

Holy fucking *shit*, Liz and Ezra and all the other kids and—

"Hey," Drista murmured under her breath. "Hey, Tommy. It's not your fault. Calm down."

"But it—" he cut himself off as the last person exited the ship.

"Corpse," Drista and Lani said at the same time.

The Phantom in question kept glancing around, running a hand through his dark hair. "Uh—hi."

"They think we're dead?" Tommy asked finally. Wow, Purpled would be pissed.

"Yeah," the Kitsune replied. "I—I, uh, suppose we better fix that."

"You guys created a signal?" Jack said eventually, squinting at the temple. "What is *that*?"

"It was here when we arrived," Lani replied. "We think—uh, someone must have been here to create the temple, but no colonizers or any sentient form of life exists."

"That's odd," the Kitsune said. "Well, I'm Wol'fahb'ylle, but you can call me Wolf," she said.

"Huh," Tommy said. "You have an Elytrian name."

Wol'fahb'ylle blinked at him. "I—I suppose."

"Wol'fahb'ylle," he repeated. "*Saturn's child*." She stared at him. "What?"

"...who are you?"

"Oh, I'm Tommy," he said brightly. "Tommy Innes." Understanding flashed through her, quick as a bird and bright as a shooting star. "I suppose you three recognized Lani Underscore. And—uh, you've probably connected the dots—this is Drista Taken, sister of Dream Taken of the *L'manburg*."

"You're the son of Sam Innes," Jack said. "And you're an Avian."

"Yeah," he said, eventually.

"I knew your dad a long time ago."

"Yeah," he said again, slightly awkwardly. "So did I."

"What the fuck," Corpse muttered under his breath, stepping forward and looking past Tommy, Drista, and Lani. He turned, glancing over his shoulder, and smiled when he saw Rae and Sykkuno approaching.

"Bit late, innit?" he called to them.

There was dead silence.

Tommy turned back to Corpse, who had an absolutely flabbergasting expression across his face.

"Oh, uh," Sykkuno said, stopping about a meter behind Tommy and rubbing the back of his head. Rae was dead silent. "Hi, Corpse! Jack!" he winced. "Uh, sorry, miss, but I don't know who you are."

"Wol'fahb'ylle," she said. "Nice to meet you...?"

"Sykkuno," he said. "And this is Valkyrae. Rae." The Kitsune fell dead silent, mouth moving wordlessly.

"*Sykuuno*?" Corpse breathed out sharply. "Is it really you?"

"Ha, um, yeah," the Avian said, smiling. Tommy and Drista moved to make room as the two collided in a hug, and Tommy grinned despite himself. Jack blinked between them, looking shocked. "I've uh—I've missed you."

"I thought you two were dead," Jack admitted loudly. "Most everyone did." His eyes glanced over Corpse, and Tommy knew that the Phantom wasn't included in that sentence.

"Well," Rae said, with a slight smile on her face—the first time she had spoken to the group. "We're not dead, are we?"

"No," Corpse said slowly. "You're not."

This was really awkward.

Wol'fahb'yлле nodded towards the temple behind them. "You got anything in there you want?"

Tommy thought about the medkit, the emergency blankets, the wooden carved bowl with a half-finished meal in it—the shutdown signal.

"No," he said, and nobody argued with him. The knife he had in his hands was enough, and the two girls on either side of him was enough. "I want to go home."

"And we'll take you right to the *L'manburg*," Jack said, smiling at him. "It'll uh—it'll be about a day or so before we're in transmission range, though. We're pretty far out."

He noted that they did not say Terra when they referred to home. And neither Lani nor Drista made any move to correct them.

"Thank you so much," Lani said, and her eyes were full of grateful tears as she lurched forward and hugged Wol'fahb'ylle, who hugged her back without a blink. "So much."

"It's no problem, my dear," the Kitsune murmured. "You're safe now. We'll take you home."

The *Mira* was different from the *L'manburg* in so many ways, despite being the same ship make. For one, the air was different—it was a different family, a different group of friends. That didn't mean that Tommy felt like an outcast—quite the opposite, though Lani was clearly overwhelmed with the number of people. Fortunately, she seemed to know a few of them—the helmsman, Hafu, was another Shulker, and she was positively ecstatic to see another of her kind, especially since Lani had been presumed dead.

Tommy was there when Toast was reunited with the two friends he had wrongfully banished years ago; Tommy was there when Rae and Sykkuno cried and when an ex-elite team of spies—the Amigops, a Feline named Tina whispered in his ear—was reassembled once more. Tommy was there with a smile on his face as he saw the happiness on the crew's faces.

"Can I have a gun?" Drista asked Rae dutifully amidst the chaos, thirteen hours on their journey back to Terra and after Tommy had finally taken a proper shower and replaced his school uniform for a Galactic one. Instead of the *L'manburg's* heart that signified him to be part of the crew, the *Mira* bore one of a pink lily flower surrounded by a rainbow line.

"What?" the Avian said, turning around. She had an alcoholic beverage in her hand, and Tommy glanced down at the apple juice in his.

"A gun," Drista said patiently.

"...no," Rae said. "That would be stupid."

Drista snorted. "I obviously meant a *fake* gun," she said, sarcasm dripping in her voice, and Tommy got the feeling she really hadn't meant a fake gun. "Like a B.B gun."

Rae raised an eyebrow. "We have foam ball guns in the gym," she said slowly. "But note that we're gonna be coming into range of your ship soon, so don't wear yourselves out."

"Great!" Drista said brightly. She grabbed Tommy's hand. "Come on!"

"Wha—" he said, stuffing the last of a vegan wrap into his mouth and glancing over at the couch. Lani was passed out on there, and someone—probably Hafu—had placed a blanket over her small body. "Wait, what?"

"Sorry!" Drista apologized as they ran into a Feline named Yvonne—Tommy was pretty sure she was an engineer. She looked startled at the kids running through the midst, and Tommy didn't have time to say sorry either as Drista dragged him out of the mess hall.

"What are we doing?" he hissed.

"They won't let us drink alcohol, so I thought we could have some fun with guns," Drista said, an evil glint entering her green eyes.

"I—we're underage," he said. "And I can't shoot a gun."

"I wasn't planning on having *you* shoot a gun," the Human said patiently. "I was planning on shooting a gun *at* you."

"Why?" he gaped.

"Because I have ideas on how cool you could be if you could do what Rae and Sykkuno can do with their airbending skills."

Tommy sighed, running a hand through his hair. "You've been watching entirely too much *Avatar: The Last Airbender*," he said.

"Maybe, but I still have ideas."

He didn't know if he liked those ideas.

The ship had maintained a deathly pall for days as the *L'manburg* began its slow haul back to Terra.

There was no proof, Wilbur would think, as he lay in bed, unable to sleep. He knew that further down the hallway, many others were restless—and even though few slept, many of them bore nightmares. *There was no proof that they were dead*.

But...in the end, how could they be alive? There were no planets, no area for an escape pod—the singular one the taxi had had. And they'd scoured the surrounding area for tech—only to find nothing.

Wilbur blinked, the corners of his eyes burning from the countless tears he had shed over the three children that the crew had called their own. Many times he would walk into a private room and see someone sobbing at a table, and he would hurriedly back out, swallowing his own lump in his throat.

Many times he knew that others caught him in the same act.

And still, the universe flowed by. The clock moved, and so the galaxy moved on, three more lives lost.

Niki and Eret were keeping a close eye on Tubbo, and George on Dream—and as for Tommy...Tommy didn't have a family. Not a real one, anyway. Guardianship wasn't *really* official, but it was damned close, and Wilbur admitted that he'd sobbed into Phil's shoulder on more than one occasion in well under twenty-four hours.

How could three kids have so much impact on everybody?

He tried to tell himself that he hadn't known Tommy that long. That he *shouldn't* miss Tommy that much. And then he was overcome with shame for that feeling, though when he visited Eret, the Phantom told him it was a way of dealing with grief.

On more than one occasion, he'd found himself in medbay, lying on one of the cots as Niki struggled to do her job, as Ponk agonized over the grief that his little brother was currently going under—as the missing space in the medbay became more and more stifling.

It seemed everywhere he walked, there was a remnant of the three children. A leftover card game that Tommy, Tubbo, Purpled, Ranboo, Lani, and Drista had played and never cleaned up in one of the back rooms.

He didn't clean it up.

The blinking score of a video game on a datapad screen left open, far too hot. Wilbur had watched the battery burn out with tears on his face and then had left, not realizing it had been nearly thirteen hours.

He was there when Ranboo had a massive breakdown in the middle of the mess hall and started screaming about sunsets and schooling and chemistry, of all things—though he knew what the Enderian was remembering. He was there when Purpled rushed in and managed to calm Ranboo down, and he walked away when the two boys began to cry together, holding each other as if they were the only thing that remained.

Which, he supposed, was true, when it came to the Children's Rebellion.

He was there when the Vice-Admiral called Phil on Alpha shift, when they were all exhausted and about to drop dead on their feet, and Techno didn't have the energy to correct Dream when he made

a mistake at the helm deck. He was there when Phil told him that he was sorry, but he needed some space, and Toast's face twisted in understanding and sadness—but insisted that he had something they wanted to see. Wilbur lifted his head from the communications desk, where he'd been trying to catch five minutes of sleep to add to the singular hour he'd had the night before.

"I don't—" Phil said, voicing all their opinions in two simple words, but Toast's face was gone, and instead, a woman grinned violently at them from against a white wall.

Wilbur decided he hated her. She was entirely too happy.

"Hi!" she said brightly. "I'm Rae!"

There was silence, and Rae's smile faltered for a second.

"Sykkuno," she hissed. "Introduce yourself."

"You already did," a male's voice said from behind the camera, and Wilbur watched curiously as it shifted—it wasn't just a camera; it was a recording camera. Huh. Odd.

"What the fuck is going on?" Phil demanded, anger visible in his tone. Usually, he'd be better at hiding it, but...well, he wasn't at the moment. Wryly, Wilbur supposed none of them were.

His heart hurt.

"You're Valkyrae and Sykkuno," Techno said, somehow managing the same monotone voice that he always carried, though Wilbur knew the Piglin's rites because of Kristin and saw the three telltale bands on his tusks that signified hesitant mourning. "You're dead."

Rae blinked at him. "You shouldn't know that," she chided, and Wilbur *really* wanted to punch her. "We were supposed to be away on secret missions." And then Wilbur realized who they were—the two missing crew members of the *Mira*, who had 'supposedly' been sent away on secret missions for the Galactic Rebellion. Apparently, that had been a cover-up...?

"You died," Tubbo spoke up, his voice hollow and sad and hoarse. "I hacked into the records."

"Isn't that illegal?" the voice from behind the camera—Sykkuno, Wilbur supposed—spoke up.

"I don't care," Tubbo muttered.

"Anyway!" Rae chirped, clapping her hands together. "We have a surprise!" Phil's wings ruffled angrily, and Wilbur was too tired to do anything but stare. "C'mon!"

Sykkuno grumbled under his breath, but then Rae was moving, jogging down the hallways, and the camera was following her bouncily, and Wilbur really wanted to walk out because he couldn't deal with the happiness those two had.

Something made him stay. Something that made Tubbo stay that made Dream stay, that made everyone on the bridge of the *L'manburg* stay, and he didn't know what it was until Rae opened a door with a blinding grin and immediately the soundproofed voices of three individuals became very *un*-soundproofed.

"—BITCH!" Tommy Innes howled as the camera focused on him, from where he was lying on the ground, his arm raised above him, protecting him from an onslaught of yellow foam balls.

The foam balls were being pelted at him by none other than Drista, her hair done up in twin space buns and laughing as she assaulted the poor kid with the pellets. "You should just catch them," she teased. "With your airbending, y'know?"

"That's not how it works!" Tommy shouted back at her, cringing. "I'm not a fuckin' airbender, prick!"

"Drista," Lani sighed, from where she was sitting on the ground idly making the same yellow foam balls appear and reappear in her hands.

Rae cleared her throat, and Tommy, Drista, and Lani turned back towards them.

Wilbur could not breathe. He wasn't sure if he *had* breathed. If he was able to anymore. Phil was frozen in his chair, his feathers maintaining the same position that they had before, and Tubbo was on his feet, having stood up—had he really not heard that? Dream looked as if he had about seven of those foam balls that Drista seemed so fond of in his mouth, as it was wide open and his cheeks were puffed up. Even Techno looked mildly surprised, which, for him, meant that he was utterly astonished with the turn of events.

Holy shit, they were alive.

Holy fucking shit.

"Say hi to the camera!" Rae chirped, pointing at the thing that Sykkuno was holding.

"Hi, camera!" Lani said dutifully, waving to it.

Tommy was more forward, narrowing his eyes at it. "Who's on the other side?" he challenged.

"The bridge of the *L'manburg*," Sykkuno explained.

Drista whooped, tossing her gun away with a loud clatter that made everyone wince. She bounded towards it, grabbing it out of Sykkuno's hands. Wilbur felt slightly nauseated as he watched it spin as the Human attempted to right it.

"Other way around, Drista," Lani called, and Drista straightened it correctly this time so they could see her beaming face.

"Hi," she said. "I wish I could hear you." There was a slight pause. "Can they talk?"

"No," Rae said, from out of frame.

"Oh my God," Dream said, speaking up for the first time since they'd seen the three children. "Oh my *God*, they're alive."

"Of course Tommy is," Techno muttered, though there was only fondness in his eyes. "He's like a cockroach." Phil snorted and slapped his First Officer lightly, relief on his face. He seemed to have de-aged a thousand years.

"Hi, guys!" Drista said again, and then the camera was yanked from her, and suddenly Tommy was holding it, grinning before turning it around to face the rest of the room. A very amused Rae and—Sykkuno, he assumed—were standing near the door, and Drista was flipping the person behind the camera off. Lani juggled the yellow foam balls, now, face concentrated until Drista chucked one of them at her, and she scowled.

"Since I'm so cool and epic, I'll introduce you to the idiot squad," Tommy announced, and Wilbur's heart ached at the voice he thought he would never see again. "That's Drista; I'm sure you've heard of her." Dream gave a sort of gasping laugh at that. "She's a real bitch, and she likes shooting balls at people."

"That's what she said," the Human girl said wryly.

"And that's Lani," Tommy continued, as if Drista hadn't said anything. "The only sane one. She can teleport objects."

"It's not teleportation—"

"And *this* is Rae and Sykkuno!" Tommy finished. "The very amazing Avian duo that rescued us—wait, no *helped* us—escape the planet we were marooned on!"

"...Avians?" Wilbur murmured, eyes wide. As if Drista had heard him, she laughed lightly and bent down, picking up one of the yellow balls. She stared at it for a second before chucking it at Rae.

The—Avian?—raised an eyebrow, and Wilbur watched as it swerved out of the way to hit Sykkuno directly in the face instead of her own. The other Avian shouted in surprise, rubbing his face where

it had hit him.

"That's right!" Tommy crowed. "I'm not the only one left, bitches!" Suddenly his hand was in front of the screen, covering the majority of it. "Fuck you, Chroma! Haha! You didn't manage to eradicate the rest of my kind!"

"Okay, Tommy," Rae said, amusement in her tone. "You can stop flipping off the air now."

Wilbur had never had so much relief in his entire life. Not when they'd come and found Tommy, Purpled, and Tubbo in the teleportation room after the ship had been blown to smithereens—though that was a close second—not when he'd had to climb a fifty-foot cliff to reach the transportation ship with an army of angry rat-things nipping at his heels.

They were alive.

"We'll deliver them to you in about four hours," Rae said brightly to the camera. "I believe our navigator—Pokimane—has messaged you the coordinates of the meeting point?"

Everyone looked directly at Wilbur as he fumbled for the console and the message board.

And...yeah. A message from another navigator, complete with some ostentatious words mixed in between.

But there it was.

Coordinate points, a meeting ground, and three children grinning in a solid picture that Pokimane had tagged as "*you want to see this ;)* ".

He had.

He grinned as he touched the screen of the three sleeping children on the ground, taken approximately fourteen hours ago, according to the note, and then forwarded it to Dream, whom he

noticed inputted the coordinates without anything from Phil.

This had to be a dream.

It wasn't.

Wilbur grinned, and then Rae ended the call apologetically, saying something about dinner time. He didn't care, because his face hurt from the smile—and yet there was nothing that stopped him from letting out a small laugh as he glanced around the room and saw the relief and joy on everyone's faces.

They were alive.

And that was all that mattered.

Maybe don't name an animal in a language where a native speaker will hear you and will make fun of you

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Sometimes, you will never know
the value of a moment until it
becomes a memory.*
- Dr. Seuss

There was a moment of silence as the two groups looked at each other. The same transport that had rescued Tommy, Lani, Drista, Rae, and Sykkuno from the planet—Icarus-45HB, he was told, was the name—brought them aboard the *L'manburg*. The Vice-Admiral and the two Avians arrived with them, and though the three had been offered a video call shortly before meeting up, Tommy and the others had decided they'd instead be reunited in person. His datapad was long gone, so no messages were received—nor would ever be received again, from that piece of tech that Philza had gotten him for his birthday.

The disembark opened with a slight hiss, and for a moment, all Tommy could do was raise his head and stare at people he thought he might never see again—live, yes, but see them—his *family*, he supposed—again?

No, he hadn't been that optimistic. Perhaps he should be in the future.

Rae shifted behind him, confused about why she stood among a bunch of frozen statues. Perhaps it was because they were amazed at his epicness or amazed at how cool he was. He felt a slight smirk tug at his face at that self-important thought.

It was Purpled who moved first from where he stood among the throng of people.

Purpled, not Dream or Tubbo or Wilbur or Phil or Niki or Eret or any of the other crew members—what if there was an emergency? Everyone he'd ever met on the ship was there, even people he vaguely realized. What if the Arachnids attacked?

No, the *Mira* was stationed nearby. They would be fine.

It was Purpled that Tommy met halfway down the gangplank, and it was Purpled who shed the first tear as he grasped Tommy so tightly that he thought his Avian biology had somehow taken ahold of him and forced the breath from his chest. It was Purpled that stared at him with starstruck magenta eyes, and it was Purpled, and Tommy hugged back, a smile coming to his face.

"I thought I'd lost you," the Human said softly.

"You could never lose me," he whispered back. "Not 'till we're ninety and in our deathbeds." Perhaps that wasn't *entirely* true, but Tommy didn't mind lying, for once.

Sykkuno was frowning—he didn't know why. He didn't care.

Purpled's actions caused a ripple of events amongst the others, and Lani shrieked in enthusiasm as she was all but swamped by her family—they were much taller than the tiny five-foot-one Shulker.

He had to look up at the Enderian that stepped up behind Purpled, for Ranboo always had—and would always—be far taller than him.

"I remembered," the Enderian told him softly, and he had to listen closely as Drista punched Dream in his shoulder as her older brother tried to hug her—she finally let him, after a few seconds of pretending to struggle. Sapnap ruffled her hair, laughing slightly, and she flipped him off. "I remembered Pogtopia."

"What?" he said, shocked.

"Just—just a bit," Ranboo said, biting his lip softly as he messed with his duo-colored hair. "Flashes, you know? Things. Words." He glanced at Purpled, who had finally stopped trying to

suffocate Tommy and was instead just gripping his forearm so hard that he thought it would bruise. "Promises."

Tommy didn't know whether to smile or wince. "Is that a good thing?" he settled on. "Remembering, I mean?"

"I don't know," Ranboo said, looking away with a faraway look in his eyes. "Sometimes—I mean, memory gaps are annoying. But it's painful. I know it always was, based on you and Purpled, but...I don't know if I'd rather not remember anything or everything." He shifted on his feet, playing with the small *L'manburg* crew insignia on his chest. "I...I thought about it while you were—um, while you were gone. And—ah, and I thought maybe that I *want* to remember, because I am proud to be a survivor of the Red Planet's Genocide." Tommy smiled at him, sad and steady, and Purpled's grip tightened. He might have winced at that. "And at the same time, it *hurts* so much—" His hand moved towards his stomach, and Tommy knew he was reminded of the hunger that they had all felt, that was on the edge of his mind but barely remembered. "—and I feel like a coward wanting it gone."

"That's what being a survivor is like," Purpled spoke up, and there was no malice in his voice as his lips twitched slightly. "Pain and failure and knowing that you were powerful enough to survive, but blaming yourself at the same time." He shrugged slightly. "There is nothing we can do about history except learn from it and be better."

Ranboo reached out and touched his side—he'd never been one for touch, so when they'd remet again, Tommy had been surprised at his fondness for touching Tubbo—and then he smiled and was gone, walking over to talk to Lani.

"Get out of my fucking way," Tommy heard. "I'm going to fucking kill him!"

He looked up to see a certain brown-haired Phantom staring down at him with a neutral expression that bordered possessiveness and relief.

"Hey, Wilbur," he said.

"I thought you were *dead*, Toms," the Phantom choked out, and then Purpled's grip on his arm was gone, and Tommy felt like he'd just gotten hit by an escape pod falling from space as the taller man wrapped his arms around Tommy and squeezed.

He wasn't crying.

Nope.

"If it helps, I knew you were alive," he chortled.

"That doesn't fucking help, you stupid gremlin," Wilbur muttered into his hair. "You're never going on spaceships again."

"We're literally on a spaceship right now," Purpled pointed out helpfully.

There was a bit of silence.

"Alone," the Phantom clarified. "Without us."

"I was literally with Lani and Drista," he said, eye twitching as he pushed Wilbur away to look the Phantom eye-to-eye. "I wasn't alone." Tommy frowned. "And what about the other field trips—hey, wait a second, I never passed my finals—"

A hand came down upon his shoulder, and Tommy *almost* reached for the knife in his pocket before he managed to stop himself, letting out a small breath of relief when he found it was only Phil, staring down at him with a fond look, his feathers slightly encompassing both him and Wilbur.

"Don't have to," the Elytrian said. "I'm withdrawing you from Fleet school."

Tommy felt his jaw drop.

"Keep your air in, Theseus," Technoblade said as he reached over and closed Tommy's mouth with a tap of his finger. "Wouldn't want you to die." Techno's grin was only *half* feral, and Wilbur

muttered some choice words under his breath as he grabbed Tommy back and tugged him closer to his chest.

"Theseus?" Tommy muttered, mind going to the book of stories that Techno had gotten for him at his birthday. He'd read it, of course, but he didn't know how their stories were all that familiar.

"Wait, you're withdrawing Tommy from Fleet school?" Drista asked with a bright—yet confused—grin.

"Only in the same way you are," Phil chided. "No more field trips."

"But my friends—" he whined.

"You don't have any friends," Purpled cut him off, and Tommy flipped him off with a curl of his lip. "Lani and Drista are literally right here." He pointed them out with a jerk of his thumb, and the silence that followed afterward—the remnants of the last friend—and the raise of Purpled's eyebrow—was all he needed to be reminded of Sniff's fate.

"So...I'm going to school myself?" he asked, confused.

"No," Phil said. "We're more than capable of teaching you. Where do you think Lani and Drista disappear to three times a week for seven hours? There are lessons. You can join them. We *are* a full crew, after all."

"You don't seem that put out," Wilbur noted when Tommy only blinked.

He rolled his eyes. "Are you *kidding*? This is great! I can graduate, *and* I get to be aboard a fucking spaceship! This is absolutely poggers!" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Wilbur mouth *poggers?* to Techno, who shrugged. "I can start shooting shit!"

"...that's not quite how it works," Phil said, a muscle in his eye twitching.

"Drista did," he pointed out.

"That was an emergency, *and* Drista's brother is the helmsman," Techno pointed out gruffly.

"Also, I'm cool," the Human girl said, and Tommy poked her in the arm.

"Not going to run that plan by me, Captain?" an amused voice said, and Tommy fought his way out of Wilbur's grip to see the Vice-Admiral standing there, Rae and Sykkuno flanking his sides.

Phil crossed his arms. "He's *my* kid."

"You have guardianship."

"Then I'll adopt him," the Elytrian shot back, and Tommy's jaw dropped again.

Techno poked him in the cheek. "Don't choke on air." Tommy snapped his mouth shut and glared at the half-Piglin, who grinned lazily at him.

"It's fine, Phil," the Vice-Admiral said, smiling. "I understand why you wish to withdraw him from Fleet school. I admit that...there are certain things that need to be rewritten." He shook his head. "But that's a problem for the next Administrator."

"You're stepping down?" Dream asked, tilting his head as he looked up from a conversation with Sapnap and George.

Toast shrugged. "We're nearing all-out war with the Arachnids," he admitted, and Tommy stiffened, because that was news to him.

It didn't seem to be news to Phil, though, because the Elytrian just sighed. "I know," he admitted. "Going to join the frontal assault?"

"We have a frontal assault?" Tommy whispered, glancing up at Wilbur.

"We do *now*," Toast answered for him. "There have been small skirmishes everywhere—like the *U.S.S Midway*—and Command is getting tired of the excuses the Arachnids are giving for them. Still, war is, and always will be, an opportune moment for the people to tear down their governments from the inside after heavy taxes and death tolls start to hit."

Tommy bristled. "But they've killed—"

"Tommy," Phil said, and he shut up. "Making this decision will be a tough one." He looked back over at Toast. "What's your side on this?"

"I think...I think that we can't continue to let civilians die," the Vice-Admiral answered solemnly. "It was warships at first, but transports and taxis...no, I think that our teetering on the edge of the knife is going to slice us in half if we don't pick a side." He raised an eyebrow. "And I don't intend to stand down."

"I'm worried for the kids," Phil admitted, and Tommy had to clench his jaw from speaking up, Wilbur's hand on his shoulder simultaneously tightening. "They shouldn't see war."

"You made the decision to make the Lieutenant your Chief Operations Officer," Toast told him lightly, glancing over at Tubbo, who was happily showing Lani how to trade one of the yellow foam balls between two hands.

"I know," Phil said. "And he is more than capable." Toast inclined his head, not disagreeing. "Even still, he is seventeen."

"War is not made for children," Rae said solemnly, speaking up.

Phil looked at her for a moment. "I'm Philza," he said, holding out his hand. "Nice to meet you...Rae, was it?"

She nodded. "Nice to meet you as well," she said, tilting her head. "I met your...well, I met Tommy when his escape pod crashed on Icarus-45HB."

"An Avian, hmm?" Phil hummed as they shook hands.

She inclined her head. "Indeed." Rae nodded at Sykkuno. "This is Sykkuno. An Avian as well, since I'm assuming you saw the video."

"And you were on...Icarus-45HB as well?" Phil said, glancing at the black-haired Avian and stumbling over the planet's obscure name as well.

"Yes," Sykkuno said. "Rae and I built the distress signal from the parts of our ship but only managed to complete it with the tech from their escape pod." He smiled. "So, really, it's all them."

"Oh, stop it," Rae said, laughing, as she turned back to Phil. "I'm glad you are taking care of our youngest."

Phil froze. "What?" he said.

"The youngest," Rae said. "Of our species." She tilted her head. "You didn't know?"

"I mean, I thought Tommy and—" Phil cut himself off as he eyed both Purpled and Tommy. "Uh, the other guy—were the only ones left."

"I've lost contact with the other Avians," Toast admitted, speaking up. "But from what I've seen...yes, Tommy is the youngest."

"The other guy?" Sykkuno asked, and Tommy flinched slightly.

There was a bit of silence.

"Chroma," Purpled replied. "I suppose you haven't heard of the Red Planet." His voice was dry.

"No, actually," Sykkuno said. "I've—I've been catching up on the media." His eyes flickered to Tommy, and he remembered the conversation in the makeshift garden with Lani. "I know—um, I know who that is."

"I'm glad that that bitch isn't the only other one left," Wilbur piped up.

"Wil," Phil sighed.

"What?" Wilbur demanded. "I am!"

Rae smiled sincerely. "I am glad as well," she admitted. "Though I would have rather met under better circumstances than seeing three children chased across the canyons by one of the r'kylush ty'lim'en."

"...wolf thing?" Philza asked blankly.

Rae blushed. "It's what Jack was always calling the fuzzy birds that would hit the windows," she muttered. "I don't know why I called them that."

"They had sharp teeth and howled," Tommy said frankly. "They were red. Should have called them ar'ply r'kylush." Wilbur looked at him sharply. "*What?*"

"You know Elytrian."

"No," he said in annoyance. "I know my colors and numbers. And some animals." He did not mention that it was Grian that had taught him the rudimentary basics, but he knew that Wilbur guessed it was the Elytrian from Pogtopia, from the way his eyes softened.

"Now I wish I'd called them something different," Rae grumbled under her breath.

"You really should have," Phil said, but he was only joking. "But I would like to thank both of you for rescuing members of my crew."

"It's not a problem," Sykkuno said, smiling slightly. "I'm glad we were there to see them before they fell."

"You mean before Tommy pushed me off a cliff," Drista spoke up.

Tommy winced.

"What."

Welp, that was Dream. Shit, fuck. Uh—

"In my defense, we didn't die," he said. "Avian pogness saved us."

Dream squinted at him. "What does that word even mean?"

"Don't ask me," Purpled sighed. "He used to say that a lot. I'm glad he's saying it again. Could *not* tell you what that meant."

"I'm pretty sure he's talking about how they were totally going to fall to their deaths, and Sykunno and I saved them," Rae pointed out, smirking slightly.

"In my defense," Lani piped up, having wandered over with Tubbo, Niki, and Eret—Tommy readily avoided the Merling's gaze, though Tubbo popped in between him and Wilbur to hug him quickly. "I'd already walked like...fifteen miles or something that day, and then I had to run from that red wolf thing, so...what's not to like about falling to your death?" She shrugged, and Drista snickered.

Phil sighed. "Well," he said good-naturedly. "I suppose I then have you to thank for saving their idiocy?"

"You love us," Drista snorted, crossing her arms.

"I still can't get over the fact that Tommy pushed them off a cliff," Dream complained. Tommy flashes him a grin and stuck out his tongue.

"*I can*," Purpled said. "Good riddance."

"*Purpled*." Niki's voice was tired but amused.

"Fucker," Drista said.

"At least I didn't get pushed off a cliff," Purpled snorted.

"It doesn't matter," Tommy butted in. "Nobody died, nobody got injured."

"Except for your arm," Rae noted, and Tommy groaned loudly. "What? Did I say something wrong? You bandage things horribly, but I don't know how to do better, so I never fixed it."

"You've incited the pterodactyl," Tubbo whispered loudly.

"Heyyyyy, Niki," he said. "I'm not injured." Tommy held up his hands and slowly backed away as Niki stalked towards him, eyes gleaming. How could one woman with a fucking tube attached to her face seem so predatorial?

"Oh, you're fucked," Wilbur said.

"Fucking *do* something!" he gasped. "Get me away from this madwoman!"

"Oh, Tommy," Niki crooned. "Can I just see your arm?" She blinked innocently, but she was *anything* but innocent. "I promise not to do anything bad."

"No needles?" he said, peeking out from behind Techno. The half-Piglin in question snorted and all but grabbed him by the scruff of his collar. Tommy screeched like a cat, all eyes turning to him for a second before people realized that it was just Tommy being Tommy, and, fuck their little inconsequential lives, turned away. "TRAITOR! BETRAYAL! FUCK YOU, TECHNOBLADE! I LOATHE THE VERY GROUND YOU WALK ON!"

"Stop screeching, gremlin," Wilbur said, ruffling his hair. Tommy huffed and obediently held out his arm as Niki stared him down—he was *taller* than her; why was she staring him down?—and then took his arm and pushed up his sleeve.

"Where'd you get this from?" the medic questioned carefully as she took in the deep scab about a quarter size that was on Tommy's forearm.

"That's where Zee Zee ripped out the tracker," he explained, and both Lani and Drista giggled. Niki froze for a second before she pressed on it lightly. He hissed.

"Zee Zee is your...?"

"Our bitch of a Survival Strategies teacher," Drista said bitterly. "Ms. Zahendia. She ripped the tracker out—somehow that fucker knew about it—"

"And you *let* her?" Wilbur asked him, frowning, as he turned to Tommy.

His eye twitched. "She held a phaser to Drista's head. I wasn't going to let another one of my friends die because of pitiful resistance." He didn't think about the others on the ship—the ones he'd *tentatively* called his friends, acquaintances at least. They were dead, and he was not.

Dream hissed slightly. "If she wasn't already blown to bits, I'd kill her myself."

"Get in line," Techno muttered.

"She also had a bomb," Lani announced. "What's it called—dead man's trigger?" Dream inhaled sharply, and Wilbur cursed under his breath.

"Dead man's switch," Techno corrected. "Wait—your teacher had a bomb?" Phil glanced up pointedly.

"She *said* she did," Tommy said. "And yeah, she had the dead man's switch." He frowned. "I guess we'll never know if she did."

"If I may," someone else piped up from behind them, and Tommy turned to see a Human with long brown hair and a startling smile. "Finn, by the way," he said, for introductions. "You've probably heard me over comms to the bridge." The last part was directed at Tommy. "Chief Engineer. We have the wreckage of the taxi in the dock, sir—" Tommy stiffened slightly, and Lani inhaled sharply. "—and Officer Vurb, our weapons expert, seems confident that it was not Arachnid fire that tore through the wreckage." Finn blinked slightly, and Tommy heard Drista inhale sharply. "He—he, uh, seemed to think that it was an engine misfire, which made no sense—but after their story, it does indeed add up."

"So—she accidentally let go of the button?" Purpled frowned.

"She's certainly stupid enough to do that," Drista muttered bitterly.

Dream placed a hand upon the top of his younger sister's head. "Peace," he said, and Drista sighed heavily. Tommy was surprised until he realized that they were indeed siblings, and therefore knew how to calm each other down. "In fairness, we will never know." Techno nodded heavily in agreement, and Phil looked torn between acknowledging that fact and placating the children. "However," the Human said, bringing their lingering thoughts back to the present. "I think it is...in the rights of their parents to know certain events." He made eye contact with Tommy. "Are there people aboard the ship who, after they ejected you three onto—whatever planet that was—would kick up a...well, a ruckus?"

Tommy's lips cracked up into a small smile, and it was only because Dream had used one word for another. "It's alright," he said tiredly. "You can say rebellion." Purpled and Ranboo both tilted their head in unison.

"Liz," Lani said softly, and Tommy and Drista both looked at her. "She—she was the only one that spoke up for us, even if it was a bit late, when Ms. Zahendia raised a hand to strike us."

"The Merling?" Niki asked.

"You know her?" Tommy demanded, surprised.

"Of course," Niki said, almost—but not quite—offended. "Merlings aren't as common in Fleet school as you might have thought." She sighed. "We do not number as few as the Shulkers or the Blazeborn, and certainly not the Avians, but we are not nearly amounting to the estimates that the Felines and Humans have."

"Lih'zoreon Dayquan," Tommy said slowly. "She might have done what you said, Dream." He tilted his head. "I don't know her well enough to say that, though."

"Huh," Phil said, realization lighting his eyes. "Isn't that the Merling that we met on the way to meet Toast for the first time?" Tommy frowned. "She asked me about the Hardcore mission?"

"I don't remember," he said honestly.

"Well, then," Dream said, after a moment of silence. "At least did they not go down without a fight."

"May their souls rest among the stars," Rae said, and Sykkuno echoed her. Phil frowned at them.

"It's an Avian mourning phrase," Purpled explained, waving his hand. Rae's eye twitched, and she glanced at Tommy, probably surprised that a Human boy knew that much about so secretive a race. "What?" he said defensively. "I know shit."

"Well, then you can tell us all about how Avians work," Niki said, vague amusement flashing across her face. "In the med bay. Come on, you three."

"What—*no!*" Tommy said. "I gotta—um, I gotta say goodbye and shit!"

There was a sort of awkward silence as everyone fell silent.

"Well?" Niki said, raising an eyebrow as she reached up and adjusted her tube. "Are you going to say goodbye?"

"If I say goodbye, then you'll drag me off to the medbay," he said defensively.

Niki laughed, rolling her eyes, and Drista and Purpled snickered. Ranboo sighed heavily behind Tommy. "Just say goodbye, Tommy," she said. "It's not forever."

"It is if you kill me," he muttered, stepping forward. Rae smiled at him and hugged him, and he embraced her back before doing the same with Sykkuno. "Um—bye, I guess."

"I'll give Captain Philza our contact details," the Avian female said. "When you get your new datapad, he'll give it to you."

Tommy scratched the back of his head. "R-right. I forgot that it blew up." Drista scrunched her nose slightly. "Bye, Rae. Sykkuno."

"Goodbye, Tommy," Sykkuno said with a genuine smile. "Hope you do well in your endeavors." He glanced at Toast. "Since you're getting homeschooled and all that."

"Homeschooled...?" Tommy asked. "Oh." Right, yeah. "Yep."

"If you ever need to contact me," Rae continued, a flash of something else entering her eyes as she adjusted the pin on her chest that marked her as the Chief Security Officer. "You know how."

"Uh-huh," he said, breaking away from Wilbur and Ranboo and Purpled as Niki gave him a look and started walking towards the edge of the dock.

Crazy that it was this exact place that he'd crash-landed here with Tubbo for the first time.

"Goodbye," he called over his shoulder, and for some reason, sadness flickered him as he left...well, he supposed they were the Avian part of his flock. He took down his walls for a brief second to send the same greeting mind-to-mind, as it did not work long-distance like Elytrians' did. Rae looked up at him and raised her hand in a sort of farewell before tilting her head to listen in to the conversation that Phil started with Toast.

"Are you mad?" Lani asked curiously as the four of them walked down the halls towards the medbay. Drista huffed.

"No," Niki admitted. "It's not your fault." She glanced over her shoulder at Tommy, who shifted uneasily. "For once."

"The fuck is that supposed to mean?" he muttered.

Niki sighed and turned around, stopping the three of them in their tracks. "I don't think you understand," she said kindly. "We thought the three of you were dead."

"Yeah, I know," Drista said.

"I've been dead before," Tommy grumbled.

"*Drista*," Niki said, frowning. "Your brother thought you gone." Drista glanced to the side, her eyes shuttered with unseen sadness. "Lani, you as well. *I* thought you were dead. I mourned you for two days before the *Mira* contacted us with that video."

"I'm sorry," Tommy said honestly.

"It's...it's a bad feeling," Niki admitted. "We thought we'd failed you."

"What—it's not your fault!" Lani protested, and Tommy and Drista were quick to echo the Shulker. "You couldn't have known this would happen."

"We never got your teacher removed, merely fired at the end of the term," Niki sighed. "After what she'd done to you...I thought she wouldn't have the nerve to do it again." The Merling shook her head sadly. "Now twenty-something children lie dead because of it."

"There's a big leap from hitting someone with a ruler to holding a phaser to their head and threatening to blow up a ship," Tommy said stiffly.

Niki's eyes were sad as she considered this. "I know."

Chapter End Notes

look see I can write fluff

everything will be fluff; I can only write fluff

The Traumatized Teenagers

*"Deeds will not be less
valiant because they are unpraised."*

- J.R.R Tolkien

"So," Niki said. "Good news. No foreign infections or diseases."

"You fucking stuck me with four different hyposprays," Tommy complained, rubbing his arm.

"Yes," Niki said, without blinking an eye, as she threw her gloves into the sanitizer. "You could have had international viruses we knew nothing about."

"Doubtful," Tommy said. "Brooke scanned us when we boarded the *Mira*."

Niki pointed a scalpel in his direction, and Tommy yelped. "*Don't* replace me with other medical officers."

"SHE WAS—" Tommy cut himself off and took a deep breath. "Dammit, Niki. Really?"

"Yes," the Merling said, though, fortunately, she'd put the scalpel down.

"You didn't stick them with four needles," he complained, pointing at the other two girls, who were snickering behind their hands at his predicament.

"If you don't have it, they probably don't," Niki told him, raising a pink eyebrow. "Lani and Drista both got two."

"I'm confused why you're here," Drista interrupted, tilting her head curiously.

"...what?" Niki said as she bandaged Tommy's arm again, having just gone over it with some sort of skin sealer.

"Like, the ship shouldn't be fixed by now," Drista said. "After Merikh Rience damaged it, I mean."

Niki smiled. "We got more engineers temporarily," she explained. "They wanted us back in commission as fast as possible. So, yeah, we're all good. They just finished the last of the wiring last week."

"Ah," Drista said. "I never knew that."

"You were in school," Niki said tightly.

"Of course," Lani said bitterly. "Because that ended well."

There was a brief moment of silence.

"Are you okay, Lani?" Niki asked kindly, sitting down on the cot next to her as Drista gave Tommy a confused look.

"Fine," the Shulker snapped.

"*Clearly* not," Tommy said.

"You're not one to talk," Lani said, brown eyes flashing. Tommy flinched at her more than harsh words. "I'm sorry, but are we going to ignore the fact that our entire class is *dead*?"

Tommy closed his eyes and leaned back against the pillow at his back, suddenly feeling as if he'd aged thirty years. No, he hadn't forgotten. He had wanted to, though, because the added pain did no help to his war-torn mind.

"Are we going to forget," Lani burst out, and Tommy opened his eyes to see the girl leaning on Niki's shoulder. Drista had a hand over her eyes, her lower lip trembling slightly. "That there are now people dead?"

"Because of me," he said heavily. "Aye. I know."

"I never said that," the Shulker said unflinchingly. "I never even *meant* that. No, Tommy, I do not believe it is you."

"You know why that teacher took our spaceship towards a different location," he hissed. "Towards Arachnid territory. Because of me." He shook his head. "Death has always happened because of me."

"But she did not blow up the ship because of you," Lani said wisely. "It is not your fault that you are who you are."

"I draw others into danger around me," he said hollowly.

"And yet here we are," Drista said, raising her chin. She had tearstains leaking from her green eyes—tears he hadn't seen before. "By your side, all the same."

Niki clucked her tongue as Tommy made to speak. "We will not leave you, Tommy," she said kindly. "Not for anything. You are one of us, now. And if Chroma comes looking for you and Purpled and Ranboo, then we will fight beside you."

His breath hitched slightly. "That is not very smart," he pointed out.

Drista snorted. "Perhaps not," she agreed with a tilt of her chin. "But us Humans have always been an act-before-thinking type." She smiled at him, and Tommy smiled back at his friend.

"And I hang out with Humans far too much," Lani piped up with mirth-filled eyes.

"I mourn for my kin," Niki said stubbornly. "And I suppose I will go to her funeral, for there are not many of us Merling females that are brave enough to leave Atlantis." Tommy raised an eyebrow, and Lani shook her head quickly. "But I do not blame you, Tommy, even if you blame yourself."

"He's good at that," a voice said, and Tommy looked over his shoulder to see Purpled and Ranboo hovering in the doorway, a slight wash of brown hair—Tubbo—behind them. The magenta-eyed Human smirked at Tommy. "Too good at that, if you ask me."

"Oh, piss off, you prick," he said fondly.

Purpled snorted as he entered the room, and Ranboo gave a dipping nod of greeting to Niki. Tubbo sat down heavily on the other side of his sister, smiling as she leaned on his shoulder fondly. "I suppose I should formally welcome you two," he said eventually. "Lani and Drista."

"Huh?" Lani said stupidly.

"Oh, Gods," Drista said, rolling her eyes.

"Well, I'm all about welcoming you to the Traumatized Teenagers," Purpled said with a wide grin. "With Tommy as president, of course."

He blinked rapidly. "Uh—what?"

"Don't get him started," Ranboo groaned as Drista and Tubbo snickered. "He made a big deal of creating said group after—after Tubbo's little endeavor, *ahem*, but...yeah, I suppose Lani and Drista can be welcomed to it."

"I do not find that humorous," Niki sniffed.

"That's 'cause you're old," Purpled said, and he sounded exactly like how Tommy did when he talked to Phil. "Adults cannot be part of the Traumatized Teenagers."

"Yeah, Niki," Drista said, muffling her laugh in the corner of her elbow. "It's in the name."

"You guys have such weird coping methods," Niki sighed. Her eyes sharpened suddenly. "Hey, wait a second. I locked the door."

Purpled, Ranboo, and Tubbo all attempted to not look sheepish—but Ranboo had always been a terrible liar, and Tubbo was all smiles. "Uh," the latter started. "Um, Ranboo has clearance...?"

Niki smirked slightly. "You shouldn't end your lies in a question," she said patiently, and Lani elbowed her brother in the stomach as he wilted. "And Ranboo doesn't have clearance. Neither do you, Lani," she added. "The only people that have clearance is...hmm, nobody. The Commander and the Captain, in a strict emergency." She raised an eyebrow. "So, if I may reiterate this, how did you get into my *lovely* medbay?"

"I have no idea what reiterate means," Tubbo announced.

Niki's eye twitched. "Well, I'm sure one of your fellow teenagers could define that word for you. Oh wait, *you're the only one that's graduated.*"

"Hey, that's not fair," Ranboo objected. "I finished schooling online!"

"I did too," Purpled said.

"Yeah, and here I thought Lani and Drista would be better," Niki sighed. "And then they started to go half-online to spend more time with the crew, and then Tommy came along, and I went—wow,

finally someone going to school!" She shook her head. "Of course, now Phil's withdrawing you three."

"For good reason," Drista muttered.

Niki tilted her head. "For good reason," she agreed finally. "Still, I would prefer it if there weren't children aboard."

"Why?" Purpled said stiffly. "Because we aren't cut out to be here?"

"That is not what I said," the Merling sighed, raising a hand to calm the magenta-eyed Human down. "Nor what I implied. Sit *down*, Purpled." The boy in question sighed heavily, and Tommy just barely moved his legs out of the way as he sat down on the same cot that Tommy lay upon. "You six—all of you—are here for a reason." Her pale blue-grey eyes rested on each of them before she continued. "You deserve to be here. You truly, truly do. Phil would not allow you to be aboard the ship if you did not have the talent to be." Tommy was surprised by the truthfulness that lay behind her voice—not because of the others but because of *him*. "But we are nearing all-out war—not the little skirmishes that we've been having." Tommy bristled slightly, and Niki looked up at his movement. "I'm not saying that they weren't meaningful—they damn well were, and we've all lost people we've loved in them." She threw a look at Tubbo and Lani, and Tommy is reminded that their parents were dead as well.

He realized that he did not know how they had passed.

"But all-out war is different," Niki continued. "And we are a *warship*. That means the decisions that Phil makes in battles—now, I'm sure we won't be on the main front; Toast wouldn't order that—but if it comes to it, we will be in battles." She frowned slightly. "The decisions that Phil will make will reflect on *all* of the crew," she said. "Should this flagship fall, so will all of us. It will be war—not one-on-one, ship versus ship, but dozens against dozens and mass chaos. By the time we will have realized that we are losing, it will be too late." Niki shook her head. "And while we would rather we not have children aboard, we do need you." She eyed Tubbo last of all, who was, in the end, a lieutenant. "And they're gonna put this off as long as possible, Tommy, but I guarantee you within a year, you'll be the helmsman of the *L'manburg*."

"What—" he started, gaping. Nobody looked surprised—except him, of course. "Huh?"

Niki blinked at him. "Dream doesn't want that position," she snorted.

"That's true," Drista muttered.

Okay, *he* hadn't known that.

"Dream wants his old position back," Niki said, face scrunching up. "Chief Tactical Officer."

"He wants to fire guns," Tubbo said with a light grin.

"That's not..." Drista trailed off. "I mean, you're not *completely* wrong. Just, you know. Mostly." She raised an eyebrow. "My brother went to school to be a tactical officer and came out a helmsman."

"He is a good crewmate," Niki said quickly. "He went where he was needed and ignored his own heart." She shook her head slowly. "Hopefully, Tommy changes things."

"Hopefully, he doesn't fly us into an asteroid belt," Tubbo muttered.

Tommy looked around for something to chuck at the smirking Shulker, and eventually settled on a roll of bandages on his bedside table. Tubbo dodged it with a small laugh, and Niki clucked her tongue at him.

"Don't throw my stuff around the medbay," she chastised.

"I would never, Liuenenant Nihachu," he deadpanned.

"Of course not, Ensign Thomas," she answered, winking slightly.

Tommy gaped slightly, and Purpled hit him across the knee. "I'm an Ensign now..." he muttered.

"Only in name," the Human boy retorted. "Don't get your head full! Everyone in this room outranks you!"

"Not that anybody listens to you," Drista muttered.

"Not that Tommy listens to *anyone*," Tubbo corrected. "Besides, you know. Himself."

"Hey!" he said, faking anger. "I'll have you know that I listen to Philza Minecraft all the time!" Purpled made a gagging sound. "He's only the greatest person of all time."

"Yes, quite," Niki said, amused. "Except that time that he told you *not* to board that Arachnid's ship. And, oh, *wait*—four of you in the room disobeyed him!"

"I didn't," Drista said smugly, raising her hand.

"You would if you had been given a chance," the Merling riposted. "Phil assigned you to the tactical position temporarily since it was empty."

"Scariest fucking moment of my life," the girl muttered.

"Well," Tubbo said. "I'll have you know that the scariest moment of *my* life was thinking you dead." Lani blinked at him stupidly.

"Eh, I've been through that before," Purpled said, only half-joking as he punched Tommy in the arm, who scowled at him.

"Oh, I didn't realize your love language was violence," Tommy said, raising an eyebrow.

"At least I have the capability to love," the Human boy sniffed at him.

"Die."

"That's enough, you two," Niki said, though her voice was fond. "Children these days." She rolled her eyes ceiling-high, and Tommy snorted. Niki glanced at him, and her eyes brightened. "Which reminded me, Tommy, Bad wanted to talk to you."

He sank lower in the bed—if that were remotely possible. "I thought I was done talking to the therapist."

Purpled patted his thigh reassuringly. "You're never done," he said thoughtfully.

"I was marooned on a planet," he complained.

"All the more reason to see a therapist," Niki told him, eye twitching.

"No," he said. "No, I think I'm fine."

"*Tommy*." Purpled's exasperated voice filled the air.

Tommy didn't like Purpled when the Human did that. Tommy actually didn't like Purpled at all. In fact, he hated Purpled. Sort of. Maybe.

"You're not making Drista and Lani see Bad," he bemoaned.

"Drista will see Eret," Niki said. "And Lani gets to see Skeppy."

"Why do *I* have to see the person that shouts language at me in the mess hall when I scream fuck?"

"Maybe you shouldn't scream the f-word," Ranboo pointed out, always the diplomat. Tubbo snickered slightly.

"Shut up, Ranboob," he snorted and then jabbed a finger in Tubbo's direction. "Aren't you supposed to take *my* side, bitch boy?"

"I'm married," Tubbo said solemnly, and there were about six sighs from around the room at that statement. "I'm biased towards my husband."

"We're divorced," Ranboo said patiently.

"Oh, but think of the children—!" Tubbo said.

"You *are* a child," Niki interrupted, standing up. "Actually, everyone in the room except me is a minor." Tommy pursed his lips. "And stop talking about that marriage. It was for a mission."

"It was legal, though," Lani said.

"See!" Tubbo crowed. "At least my sister is by my side!"

Niki rubbed her forehead. "I'm coming down with a migraine," she muttered, pinching the bridge of her nose—which probably didn't help the tube of water that she was squeezing in the process. "Why—why did I get this job again?"

"So you could hurt your patients," Tommy deadpanned. He yelped when Niki threw him a glare. If looks could kill, he would have been incinerated on the spot. "Okay, okay! I'm leaving, I'm leaving!"

"One would think that Niki was the most feared person in the universe, with a reaction like that," Purpled said with a grin as he stood up and followed a pouting Tommy, the medbay doors hissing as they closed behind him.

"Do we *have* to go to the counseling office?" he said with a grumble.

"Yes," Purpled said. "But you need to change your uniform." He sniffed.

"It's a Galactic Rebellion uniform," Tommy told him. "Not an Arachnid one. What's your problem?"

"It's not the right color."

Tommy poked him in the chest. "I get it! You're jealous!"

Purpled turned a brilliant shade of red. "W-what? NO! I'm not jealous of the *Mira*! Or of the other Avians!"

"Purpled is jealous; Purpled is jealous!" Tommy sang, slapping the Human across the back of his head. Purpled muttered some choice words in a language that Tommy didn't know under his breath, though he could tell they weren't nice words. A black shape flashed in the corner of his vision. "Purpled is—OW! WHAT THE FUCK!"

"That wasn't me," Purpled pointed out.

"Yeah, I can tell," Tommy said, lifting up his leg to stare at a black animal with purple and white irises that had its claws digging into its flesh. "What the fuck is that?" It looked like a cat but bigger. And with more fangs and claws and dog-like ears.

Purpled knelt down, tilting his head. "Huh. It's a *dhi'sk*," he said.

"Are they poisonous?" Tommy yelped, gritting his teeth as the Human boy pried the claws out of Tommy's uniform and consequently his skin.

"Venomous," Purpled said. "Poisonous applies towards things that are eaten. Venomous is when organisms inject their toxins."

Tommy scowled. "Are they venomous?"

The magenta-eyed Human gave him a hard look. "No," he said. "It's an animal native to Elytra." He pet the dhi'sk gently, crooning to it.

"Hey, have you two seen any cat-like animals come by?" a voice asked, and Tommy looked around, favoring one leg with a slight grimace to see George standing there, his goggles on his forehead and wearing a lab coat over his uniform. "They escaped."

"Were you gonna do tests on the poor things?" Purpled gasped, clutching the dhi'sk protectively. "On defensive animals?"

Huh, Tommy mused. Purpled had a protective streak over small not-so-defensive animals. "Those animals are *not* defensive."

"That's because you smell," Purpled sniffed.

"I do *not*—"

"We weren't going to do tests on the dhi'sks," George said calmly, interrupting Tommy's rage. "They were transported over from the *Mira*; apparently, they were stowaways." He shrugged. "We had them in the vivarium before Jack accidentally opened the door." Tommy squinted at him slightly before realizing that he was talking about Jack Manifold, the blazeborn aboard the *L'manburg*, and not the Elytrian from the *Mira*. "Her brother, the other one, was the good one."

"Aw, you're a good girl, aren't you," Purpled crooned, and the dhi'sk yowled in his arms. Tommy blinked as he saw a trickle of blood roll down Purpled's arm from a tear in his uniform.

"I think she's not a good girl," George said, holding up his hands to reveal thick Feline-made rubber gloves. His ears flicked impatiently at the top of his head. "Seeing as you have blood on your arm."

Purpled gave him a look. "Her love language is just violence." Tommy snorted loudly.

George's eye twitched disdainfully. "Well, we were going to drop both of them at the nearest pet facility, but if you're so keen on liking her so much, you can keep her." He tilted his head. "*Both* of them."

"WHAT?" Tommy shouted.

"Are we even allowed to have pets aboard the *L'manburg*?" Purpled asked, interested.

"No," a new voice said, and Tommy spun to see Bad standing there, eyes gleaming with interest. "But I do have forms in my desk for therapy animals." He tilted his head. "So this is what you two were doing instead of coming to my office."

Tommy spluttered. "*Therapy* animals?" he demanded. "And we were stopped! I wanted to come—actually, well, I didn't, but this wasn't a voluntary stop! Please don't tell Niki."

"I'd love to have her as a therapy animal," Purpled said, glaring at George. "At least she'll be loved."

"I don't know about that," Tommy muttered.

"Hey!" Purpled brightened. "You can have her, and I'll take the other one!"

Tommy stiffened as the dhi'sk was dumped into his arms. "Uh..." he trailed off as George hid a snicker. The dhi'sk turned a baleful patterned purple and white eye towards him, and Tommy cringed slightly. "...good girl," he said.

"It's hissing," Bad noted.

"It doesn't *like* me," Tommy muttered.

"She doesn't like anyone," George said.

Well, she wasn't biting him, and Tommy was pretty sure if he dropped her, she'd claw him on the way down. So he took a deep breath and used the hand that she wasn't clinging to to scratch the fur behind her ear.

"George!" Tommy looked up to see Jack striding through the halls, clutching an identical-looking dhi'sk, save for the bright green eyes—almost the color of Dream's ugliest sweater. "Did you find the purple one?"

"Yeah," George said.

"Gimme," Purpled said, holding out his arms.

"Who knew that Purpled was soft for animals?" Tommy muttered.

Purplel肘ed him before Jack handed him the other dhi'sk with a slight grimace, prying his claws from his jacket.

"Careful," the Blazeborn said. "He's a bit prickly." Jack jerked his head at the dhi'sk in Tommy's arms. "Better than his sister, though. She's an angry little thing."

She hissed at Jack from Tommy's arms.

"I'm surprised she hasn't clawed your fucking eyes out," Jack said, taking a small step back.

"Me too," Tommy muttered,

"Apparently, they want them as therapy animals," Bad explained.

"I said no such thing!" Tommy said, looking up sharply—and then proceeded to wince as the Elytrian animal tightened its claws onto the outside of his uniform.

"I'm pretty sure those animals need therapy too," George said sarcastically.

"No," Purpled said. His dhi'sk was—fucking *purring*?—in his arms. "He likes me."

"That's surprising," Tommy shot back. "I'm astonished someone actually likes you in the first place." Purpled snorted but didn't respond, cooing at the dhi'sk in his arms that looked somewhat calm. Bad muttered something about kids under his breath, which Tommy chose not to comment on.

"Don't be silly," Purpled chided good-naturedly. "Everyone likes me."

"I fucking don't."

"Yeah, well—"

"Can we *please* stop arguing?" Bad groaned, rubbing his forehead. Tommy stuck his tongue out at Purpled childishly, who flipped him off. "Oh—George and Jack are gone." Tommy frowned and found the two scientists indeed nowhere to be found. "They must've tired of your arguing."

"See, Tommy?" Purpled challenged. "You really *can* annoy people out of a room."

"We're in a hallway."

"*Boys*," Bad said in a dangerous voice, and this time Tommy really did listen to the Blazeborn. "You have animals now."

"Against my will," he pointed out.

"I think she's cute," Purpled frowned.

"You only think that because she has purple eyes like you."

"I—"

"TOMMY AND PURPLED!" Bad screeched.

"Listening," Tommy grouched. "Ouch, what the *fuck*!" Bad's loud words had scared the dhi'sk in his arms to claw him slightly, tearing his uniform. "That fucking hurts!"

Bad crossed his arms. "You two need to listen before I take both of your dhi'sks and drop them off at the nearest shelter."

"Good," Tommy said, holding her out. "Take her. She's like a little mini demon come to life."

"She reflects you, then," Purpled said with a smirk.

"Having trouble, Bad?" a new voice said, and Skeppy clapped his friend on the back, who was groaning and pinching the bridge of his nose. "They are teenagers, after all. They were built to annoy you."

Tommy scowled at him. "Why the fuck is everyone in this hallway?"

"First of all, *child*," Skeppy said, holding up a finger. Tommy bristled. "This is one of the main hallways to the mess hall. And I don't know if you knew this, but ship time it's one in the afternoon. I'm hungry. *Second* of all, we could hear your arguing from across the ship."

"Doubtful," he muttered.

"Aww," Skeppy said, finally noticing the dhi'sk in his arms. "She's so cute! What's her name?"

Tommy blinked at him, mouth stuttering. "Uh..." His mind wrangled for a word. "Suka."

"Oh, that sounds like a good name—" Skeppy was cut off by yet another fucking person.

"That's literally *bitch* in Polish, you little gremlin," Wilbur Soot said, having turned around the hallway, a banana in one hand. "If you're going to have a therapy animal, I'm not going to let you name her a swear word." He tilted his head. "How do you even know that?"

Tommy snorted. "I know people."

"Ah, of course," the Phantom deadpanned. "Many, many people."

"Of course."

"Yes."

"I'm naming mine Ca'jat," Purpled announced.

"That's literally Cat," Tommy pointed out.

"No," the Human scoffed. "It's *Ca'jat*. The 'J' is silent."

"I'm going to make *you* silent if you don't shut the fuck—"

"Tommy," Bad warned, and he fell silent.

"Ca'jat is green in Merlish," Skeppy said thoughtfully, tapping the side of his face where the tube out of his nose was taped to the side of his face.

"Right," Purpled said. "Because his eyes are green."

"Why Merlish?" Wilbur asked carefully.

"Because green in Enderian is $\neg\vdash\vdash\vdash\vdash\vdash$," Purpled said. Wilbur fell back in surprise at the harsh half-screech that fell from the Human's mouth. "*What?* It sounds cool, but I'm not going to make everyone say that when they want to talk to Ca'jat."

"It sounds like you're dying," Tommy noted.

"==Ḳ· ||J= ᑭᑭ ᑭ==: ᑭᑭ ==!; | ᑭ ᑭᑭ |: :ᑭ," Purpled shot back.

"That's enough," Wilbur said shortly. "𐄂𐄃𐄄 𐄅𐄆𐄇𐄈𐄉𐄊𐄋𐄌𐄍𐄎𐄏𐄐𐄑𐄒𐄓𐄔𐄕𐄖𐄗𐄘𐄙𐄚𐄛𐄜𐄝𐄞𐄟𐄠𐄡𐄢𐄣𐄤𐄥𐄦𐄧𐄨𐄩𐄪𐄫𐄬𐄭𐄮𐄯𐄰𐄱𐄲𐄳𐄴𐄵𐄶𐄷𐄸𐄹𐄺𐄻𐄼𐄽𐄾𐄿𐅀𐅁𐅂𐅃𐅄𐅅𐅆𐅇𐅈𐅉𐅊𐅋𐅌𐅍𐅎𐅏𐅐𐅑𐅒𐅓𐅔𐅕𐅖𐅗𐅘𐅙𐅚𐅛𐅜𐅝𐅞𐅟𐅠𐅡𐅢𐅣𐅤𐅥𐅦𐅧𐅨𐅩𐅪𐅫𐅬𐅭𐅮𐅯𐅰𐅱𐅲𐅳𐅴𐅵𐅶𐅷𐅸𐅹𐅺𐅻𐅼𐅽𐅾𐅿𐆀𐆁𐆂𐆃𐆄𐆅𐆆𐆇𐆈𐆉𐆊𐆋𐆌𐆍𐆎𐆏𐆐𐆑𐆒𐆓𐆔𐆕𐆖𐆗𐆘𐆙𐆚𐆛𐆜𐆝𐆞𐆟𐆠𐆡𐆢𐆣𐆤𐆥𐆦𐆧𐆨𐆩𐆪𐆫𐆬𐆭𐆮𐆯𐆰𐆱𐆲𐆳𐆴𐆵𐆶𐆷𐆸𐆹𐆺𐆻𐆼𐆽𐆾𐆿𐇀𐇁𐇂𐇃𐇄𐇅𐇆𐇇𐇈𐇉𐇊𐇋𐇌𐇍𐇎𐇏𐇐𐇑𐇒𐇓𐇔𐇕𐇖𐇗𐇘𐇙𐇚𐇛𐇜𐇝𐇞𐇟𐇠𐇡𐇢𐇣𐇤𐇥𐇦𐇧𐇨𐇩𐇪𐇫𐇬𐇭𐇮𐇯𐇰𐇱𐇲𐇳𐇴𐇵𐇶𐇷𐇸𐇹𐇺𐇻𐇼𐇽𐇾𐇿𐈀𐈁𐈂𐈃𐈄𐈅𐈆𐈇𐈈𐈉𐈊𐈋𐈌𐈍𐈎𐈏𐈐𐈑𐈒𐈓𐈔𐈕𐈖𐈗𐈘𐈙𐈚𐈛𐈜𐈝𐈞𐈟𐈠𐈡𐈢𐈣𐈤𐈥𐈦𐈧𐈨𐈩𐈪𐈫𐈬𐈭𐈮𐈯𐈰𐈱𐈲𐈳𐈴𐈵𐈶𐈷𐈸𐈹𐈺𐈻𐈼𐈽𐈾𐈿𐉀𐉁𐉂𐉃𐉄𐉅𐉆𐉇𐉈𐉉𐉊𐉋𐉌𐉍𐉎𐉏𐉐𐉑𐉒𐉓𐉔𐉕𐉖𐉗𐉘𐉙𐉚𐉛𐉜𐉝𐉞𐉟𐉠𐉡𐉢𐉣𐉤𐉥𐉦𐉧𐉨𐉩𐉪𐉫𐉬𐉭𐉮𐉯𐉰𐉱𐉲𐉳𐉴𐉵𐉶𐉷𐉸𐉹𐉺𐉻𐉼𐉽𐉾𐉿𐊀𐊁𐊂𐊃𐊄𐊅𐊆𐊇𐊈𐊉𐊊𐊋𐊌𐊍𐊎𐊏𐊐𐊑𐊒𐊓𐊔𐊕𐊖𐊗𐊘𐊙𐊚𐊛𐊜𐊝𐊞𐊟𐊠𐊡𐊢𐊣𐊤𐊥𐊦𐊧𐊨𐊩𐊪𐊫𐊬𐊭𐊮𐊯𐊰𐊱𐊲𐊳𐊴𐊵𐊶𐊷𐊸𐊹𐊺𐊻𐊼𐊽𐊾𐊿𐋀𐋁𐋂𐋃𐋄𐋅𐋆𐋇𐋈𐋉𐋊𐋋𐋌𐋍𐋎𐋏𐋐𐋑𐋒𐋓𐋔𐋕𐋖𐋗𐋘𐋙𐋚𐋛𐋜𐋝𐋞𐋟𐋠𐋡𐋢𐋣𐋤𐋥𐋦𐋧𐋨𐋩𐋪𐋫𐋬𐋭𐋮𐋯𐋰𐋱𐋲𐋳𐋴𐋵𐋶𐋷𐋸𐋹𐋺𐋻𐋼𐋽𐋾𐋿𐌀𐌁𐌂𐌃𐌄𐌅𐌆𐌇𐌈𐌉𐌊𐌋𐌌𐌍𐌎𐌏𐌐𐌑𐌒𐌓𐌔𐌕𐌖𐌗𐌘𐌙𐌚𐌛𐌜𐌝𐌞𐌟𐌠𐌡𐌢𐌣𐌤𐌥𐌦𐌧𐌨𐌩𐌪𐌫𐌬𐌭𐌮𐌯𐌰𐌱𐌲𐌳𐌴𐌵𐌶𐌷𐌸𐌹𐌺𐌻𐌼𐌽𐌾𐌿𐍀𐍁𐍂𐍃𐍄𐍅𐍆𐍇𐍈𐍉𐍊𐍋𐍌𐍍𐍎𐍏𐍐𐍑𐍒𐍓𐍔𐍕𐍖𐍗𐍘𐍙𐍚𐍛𐍜𐍝𐍞𐍟𐍠𐍡𐍢𐍣𐍤𐍥𐍦𐍧𐍨𐍩𐍪𐍫𐍬𐍭𐍮𐍯𐍰𐍱𐍲𐍳𐍴𐍵𐍶𐍷𐍸𐍹𐍺𐍻𐍼𐍽𐍾𐍿𐎀𐎁𐎂𐎃𐎄𐎅𐎆𐎇𐎈𐎉𐎊𐎋𐎌𐎍𐎎𐎏𐎐𐎑𐎒𐎓𐎔𐎕𐎖𐎗𐎘𐎙𐎚𐎛𐎜𐎝𐎞𐎟𐎠𐎡𐎢𐎣𐎤𐎥𐎦𐎧𐎨𐎩𐎪𐎫𐎬𐎭𐎮𐎯𐎰𐎱𐎲𐎳𐎴𐎵𐎶𐎷𐎸𐎹𐎺𐎻𐎼𐎽𐎾𐎿𐏀𐏁𐏂𐏃𐏄𐏅𐏆𐏇𐏈𐏉𐏊𐏋𐏌𐏍𐏎𐏏𐏐𐏑𐏒𐏓𐏔𐏕𐏖𐏗𐏘𐏙𐏚𐏛𐏜𐏝𐏞𐏟𐏠𐏡𐏢𐏣𐏤𐏥𐏦𐏧𐏨𐏩𐏪𐏫𐏬𐏭𐏮𐏯𐏰𐏱𐏲𐏳𐏴𐏵𐏶𐏷𐏸𐏹𐏺𐏻𐏼𐏽𐏾𐏿𐐀𐐁𐐂𐐃𐐄𐐅𐐆𐐇𐐈𐐉𐐊𐐋𐐌𐐍𐐎𐐏𐐐𐐑𐐒𐐓𐐔𐐕𐐖𐐗𐐘𐐙𐐚𐐛𐐜𐐝𐐞𐐟𐐠𐐡𐐢𐐣𐐤𐐥𐐦𐐧𐐨𐐩𐐪𐐫𐐬𐐭𐐮𐐯𐐰𐐱𐐲𐐳𐐴𐐵𐐶𐐷𐐸𐐹𐐺𐐻𐐼𐐽𐐾𐐿𐑀𐑁𐑂𐑃𐑄𐑅𐑆𐑇𐑈𐑉𐑊𐑋𐑌𐑍𐑎𐑏𐑐𐑑𐑒𐑓𐑔𐑕𐑖𐑗𐑘𐑙𐑚𐑛𐑜𐑝𐑞𐑟𐑠𐑡𐑢𐑣𐑤𐑥𐑦𐑧𐑨𐑩𐑪𐑫𐑬𐑭𐑮𐑯𐑰𐑱𐑲𐑳𐑴𐑵𐑶𐑷𐑸𐑹𐑺𐑻𐑼𐑽𐑾𐑿𐒀𐒁𐒂𐒃𐒄𐒅𐒆𐒇𐒈𐒉𐒊𐒋𐒌𐒍𐒎𐒏𐒐𐒑𐒒𐒓𐒔𐒕𐒖𐒗𐒘𐒙𐒚𐒛𐒜𐒝𐒞𐒟𐒠𐒡𐒢𐒣𐒤𐒥𐒦𐒧𐒨𐒩𐒪𐒫𐒬𐒭𐒮𐒯𐒰𐒱𐒲𐒳𐒴𐒵𐒶𐒷𐒸𐒹𐒺𐒻𐒼𐒽𐒾𐒿𐓀𐓁𐓂𐓃𐓄𐓅𐓆𐓇𐓈𐓉𐓊𐓋𐓌𐓍𐓎𐓏𐓐𐓑𐓒𐓓𐓔𐓕𐓖𐓗𐓘𐓙𐓚𐓛𐓜𐓝𐓞𐓟𐓠𐓡𐓢𐓣𐓤𐓥𐓦𐓧𐓨𐓩𐓪𐓫𐓬𐓭𐓮𐓯𐓰𐓱𐓲𐓳𐓴𐓵𐓶𐓷𐓸𐓹𐓺𐓻𐓼𐓽

"You guys sound like demons," Skeppy said. "Alright, though. Ca'jat it is." Tommy noted that although Purpled was decent at Merlish, the word flowed like water in Skeppy's native tongue and like crystal in Wilbur's mouth. "What about you, Tommy?"

He licked his lips for a second, bringing the dhi'sk up to stare into her purple and white flecked eyes. She hissed at him, and Tommy nearly dropped her in getting away from her silver claws. "Mellohi," he said after a moment. "Mellohi."

"That's not a word in any language I know," Wilbur frowned. "And I know sixty-two." Skeppy and Bad both looked confused as well.

He smiled slowly. "I know."

"Does it mean purple?" Purpled asked, ever the arrogant bastard.

"I'm not naming a dhi'sk after *you*, dumbass," Tommy said. "I have more creativeness than naming an animal after its eye colors. No. No, it, uh—it means something else."

"What does it mean?"

"Nothing," he said with a slow smile. "Nothing at all."

Oink Oink, Bitch

Chapter Notes

[Here](#) is some amazing art created by [_Ace_OfSpaces_](#). Tommy's looking up to some nefarious deeds >:)

[AND HERE](#) is a sneak peek at a TCR animatic that [hylidae](#) is creating. ABSOLUTELY GORGEOUS!

[Liz](#), as per usual, has created some (this time) UNCANONICAL catboy art of George. You can find it [here](#).

*"Time is nature's way of keeping
everything from happening at once."*

- John Archibald Wheeler

Phil came to visit him four hours later after he'd checked in with Bad, gotten a new uniform from an irked Purpled, received a new datapad with Lani and Drista from a Feline engineer named Vurb, and had received a set of follow-up hyposprays from Niki.

You know, just in case.

"So," Phil said. "You have a pet now."

Tommy watched as Mellohi licked at her paw from the pillow that was her temporary bed. "It wasn't my choice."

Phil rubbed his forehead. "At least this is less paperwork than when you two broke onto an Arachnid starship," he muttered, black wings rustling. Tommy coughed to cover up a laugh. "What's her name? Mellow?"

"Mellohi," he corrected absently, and the dhi'sk looked up at the mention of her name. "Huh. You already answer to it." He could have sworn she rolled her eyes before going back to cleaning her fur.

"That's better than *cat*," Phil grumbled.

"Purpled would rage if he heard you say that," Tommy said, grinning slightly. "*Ca'jat*. It's Merlish for—"

"I know what it means," the Elytrian interrupted. "I am a captain of a ship, after all. The prerequisite is five languages." His eyes twinkled as he held up his fingers. "Common, Elytrian, Merlish, Blazian—that was a difficult one; almost as hard as Enderian—and Piglish."

Tommy frowned. "Piglish is taught on Terra?"

"No," Phil said. "Actually, it wasn't considered an official Galactic language until a few years ago." He tilted his head. "People think that Piglins aren't as smart as the rest of the races—and yeah, they're not as advanced as Terra or anything, but that doesn't make them any less smart."

Tommy shrugged. "I never got to really meet the Piglins on the *H.M.S Fran*," he said truthfully. "Dad kept them away. Not because he thought they were dangerous—he kept everyone away. Wasn't Techno on that ship?"

"Yes," Phil said. "Yes, he was." The Elytrian looked troubled slightly. "I think he was—eh, sixteen at the time?" That would make him twenty-three now. "I was in my last year of graduation."

"Old," Tommy teased lightly. "You're just so old."

"Shut up, child," Phil grumbled, standing up.

"Your knees are about to break."

"I'm literally only thirty-two."

"Yeah, and you're like twice my age."

"You need to go back to school because—"

"TOMMY!"

He stood up suddenly, hand reaching for the pink knife that Purpled had given him for his birthday, what seemed like so long ago, safely in his pocket. Tommy let out a small breath when he realized it was just Drista.

"Oh, hi, Philza," she said, starting a little and looking a bit like a dhi'sk caught in headlights. "Uh, I was just here to grab Tommy. You know, since you sent our withdrawal papers in and we're waiting for the next mission details?"

"I am the captain; yes, I was aware of all of that," the Elytrian said with a fond smile. "But please, don't let me stop you two kids from playing."

"I'm not a fuckin'—"

"BYE, PHIL!" Drista shouted, grabbing the crook of his elbow and dragging him out of the room with a yelp.

"Phil, HELP!" he said. "I'm being kidnapped!"

Phil just did not care at all, as he raised an eyebrow, laughing slightly. Neither did Mellohi. They were shit people. Horrible people. Actually, Mellohi wasn't a person. Animal.

He 'allowed' himself to be dragged off by the blonde-haired Human, dodging a few amused people in the halls, including one pig bitch named Technoblade and Tubbo, who really did not care at all about his plight.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked finally.

"Guns," Drista replied.

Tommy was more than *slightly* worried, to say the least. "What?" he asked patiently.

"I got a gun," Drista said. Tommy blinked at her. "Sapnap gave it to me."

"Sapnap *willingly* gave you a gun?" he asked dubiously.

Drista snorted. "I never said willingly."

"Consent is important," he told her seriously.

"*What* did I just hear?" Wilbur Soot said, causing both of them to jump as he walked through the wall, his Phantom appearance reminding Tommy of a particular movie that he'd watched.

"You look like Casper the ghost."

"I look like—I'm not a fucking ghost, you stupid gremlin child!" Wilbur scowled at him, turning tangible. "Besides, you're letting a fifteen-year-old girl drag you around. Who's the bitch now?"

"I have a gun," Drista announced.

"She has a gun," Tommy told Wilbur.

The Lieutenant blinked sharply. "Who the fuck gave you little shits a gun?"

"Stole it," Tommy and Drista said in unison.

"Heaven save us all," Wilbur muttered under his breath, running a hand through his brown curls.
"Uh—okay. Just. Don't kill anyone."

"You're not going to *save* me?" Tommy cried out in disbelief.

Wilbur eyed him. "If she's shooting you, it's quieter for me."

Tommy flipped him off. "Bitch."

"Bye, Wilbur!" Drista called, grabbing his already slightly-sort-of-bruised arm. "If you hear screams, it's not us!"

"It's definitely gonna be us," Tommy said. "But I don't scream. Because I'm a Big Man."

"Okay, Tommy!" Wilbur called, not looking the least bit worried. "I'll tell Niki to ready the medbay!"

"No," he gasped, but they'd already rounded the corner, and Wilbur had bounded off. "Not Niki! Anyone but Niki!"

"Don't talk to yourself," Drista sniffed. "That's weird."

"You little—" he started and then cut himself off when Drista glared at him. Damn. Well, she could teach global warming a thing or two about melting polar ice caps, that was for sure. "Why do you

have a gun?"

"Because I have *ideas*," the Human proclaimed wildly as they walked into the gym.

Tommy eyed the grassy area and the track that surrounded it. "Last time I was here," he said honestly. "I suffocated from my own biochemistry."

"Then *don't* do that," Drista said evenly.

He threw up his hands—fortunately, she'd let go of his arm. "No fucking shit."

Drista picked up a very familiar weapon that had been lying on one of the stretching chairs, her eyes glittering. "Recognize this?"

He did, actually. He recognized it as the foam ball shooter from the *Mira*. "Where the fuck did you get that?" he demanded.

"Oh, Rae dropped one off before she disembarked," Drista said calmly, cocking it. "Said something about practice." Tommy had an idea that she'd stolen it—because her story wasn't adding up—but he wasn't going to say that aloud. Not when she had a gun. "I thought it would be cool if you could stop phasers."

"*First* of all," he stated. "This isn't Star Wars. I don't have the fucking force."

"You might as well, for all your ability to inhibit breathing," Drista pointed out. Tommy snorted. "Besides, you can, like, control the air."

"That's not quite how it works," he muttered. He felt like he was saying that a lot.

"Whatever," Drista said, stepping back five paces and preparing the gun. "You ready?"

"*What?*" he gasped. "Now?"

"Better now than five million years in the future," the girl said absently.

"I don't even know how this *works*," he pointed out. "I wasn't able to do it *once* aboard the *Mira*, and we were there for hours. Lani had more success than me!"

Drista's eyes glittered evilly. "Now's as good as a time as any, eh?" she said.

"Fucking hell," he muttered.

"So," Phil said, when Tommy entered the bridge late Beta shift, wincing—and limping—slightly. "I'm not going to ask why you have a golfball-sized bruise on your face." Wilbur snickered as he turned from the communications desk to look at Tommy. Tubbo covered his mouth in a smirk, and Techno just looked bored. Tommy walked over to one of the unoccupied desks—namely the tactical desk, and flipped off Dream.

"Your sister is a fucking psycho," he muttered, rubbing the bruise on his cheek.

Dream didn't look perturbed, smirking and running a hand through his hair. "Runs in the family."

"Oh, shut up," Techno grumbled.

"Now, now, children," Phil chided. "Let's not get into any arguments, hmm?" He gestured around at the bridge. "We just got the ship fixed. Wouldn't want anymore...accidents." Somehow that measly sentence was one of the most sinister things Tommy had ever heard.

"I am not a child," Techno deadpanned.

"Oh, it's okay, Techie," Wilbur crooned teasingly. "You can be an ittle wittle child with Toms."

"Die," Techno said.

"Fuck off, bald bitch," Tommy said.

"I am *not* bald," Wilbur said, a tad bit more furiously than the simple jab should have entailed.

"It's okay, Wil," Tommy said solemnly. "We've all gone through stages of grief at one point. Stage one, denial."

"You would know about that, wouldn't you," Tubbo muttered. Tommy opted to ignore him because if Tubbo had *actually* said that, they would have had huge issues.

"I'm—I'm not in fucking *denial*," Wilbur sputtered. "I have hair!"

"He's really far in denial," Tommy whispered loudly to Dream, who snorted as he sorted through the star maps that Techno had sent him.

Wilbur looked around the room. "Can—can any of you tell this gremlin child that he's wrong?"

"Nah," Technoblade said. "Fight your own battles." He tilted his head. "This is less of a battle and more of an insurrection, though. Ĕv'eryyày àtt'lebay i'syày õnw'ày eforeb'ày ityày isyà'y õ'ughtfày." Tommy blinked in surprise at the guttural language that rose from the half-Piglin's throat.

Wilbur jabbed a finger at the amused First Officer. "Don't quote Sun Tzu to me, Technoblade," he snarled. "Especially in that stupid oink oink language of yours."

"Excuse you," Techno retorted, affronted. By now, Tubbo had fallen out of his seat, he was trying to keep himself from laughing so hard. Dream had a wide smirk on his face as he busied himself with the star maps, and Phil was attempting to look mildly disappointed as he shook his head, ruffling his feathers. "That *oink oink* language, as you so graciously put it, is designated as *Piglish*, and it is one example of your sixty languages—"

"Sixty-two," the Phantom corrected, smirking broadly.

"Sixty-two languages, and if I recall, it was one of the ones you spent the *longest* on, and your accent is still shit."

"My accent is *great!*" Wilbur cried out.

"Is this what you deal with?" Tommy muttered under his breath.

"Every day, mate," Phil answered him.

"You have such a Terran accent."

"I grew up on Terra, Technoblade."

"Uckfây," Tommy shouted. The half-Piglin and the Phantom both halted their argument to look at him. "What?"

"Huh," Technoblade said, looking curious. "Where'd you learn that curse word?"

"The Piglins aboard the *H.M.S Fran*," he said, swallowing slightly, remembering listening to them from around a corner before his dad had caught him and dragged him away furiously.

"You have an Elytrian accent."

He threw up his hands. "It's an *Avian* accent. Same system, slight difference." Phil cleared his throat, and Tommy continued. "Not that one of them is better than the other. Um. What does that word mean?"

"Fuck," Wilbur said as Techno raised an eyebrow. "Of course *you* would be the ones to pick up words and not know what they meant."

"LADIES AND GENTLEMAN!" Purpled screamed, startling everyone and making Techno reach for the phaser at his side before relaxing. "Oh, sorry. Did I scare you?"

"We were in the middle of an important conversation," Wilbur said, gritting his teeth slightly. Tommy watched as two dhi'sks wandered in after the magenta-eyed Human boy, lime and purple-white eyes flicking to him. "What the fuck are they doing here?"

"They go where they want," Purpled deadpanned.

"Yeah, and I bet it typed in the passcode to the lift and pressed the arrows to take it up," Techno said, blinking slightly as Mellohi wandered over. "What the hell. No. Go away."

"Aww, Techie," Wilbur said, being his usual annoying self. "It likes you!"

"She," Tommy corrected absentmindedly, tilting his head as Mellohi made a sort of dolphin-chitter purring sound and rubbed up against Techno's ankles.

"Why does she like me?" Techno bemoaned. "Go away, defenseless animal. Go away."

"She had bacon for breakfast," Purpled said helpfully. "Maybe she can smell the pig."

"You guys need to stop makin' pig jokes," Techno said. "I'm goin' to commit mass gen—" he cut himself off as Philza coughed pointedly, and Purpled raised an eyebrow. "Uh. Well, this is awkward. I'm goin' to dropkick you all. In self-defense."

"Nice save," Dream muttered under his breath, and one of Techno's very-piglike-ears flicked in agitation.

"It's licking my ankle," Techno deadpanned, looking mildly worried. Tubbo choked loudly and waved everyone off when they looked at him. "Phil, get it off."

"She," Tommy said. "And her *name* is Mellohi."

"Wow, Tommy," Purpled said. "I didn't know you cared."

"I don't," he said.

"That's a lie."

"I don't even know what a lie is, Big Man," he said, lying.

Purpled sighed. "When you don't care to try hard enough, you're not very good at lying," he said warily. Tommy flipped him off, feeling slightly sheepish. "Anyway, I need to talk to you."

"Do you *have* to?" he groaned, sinking lower in his seat. The Human raised a single blonde eyebrow at him, clearly unimpressed. "I'm debating between asking Niki to use her regen—um, regeneration—"

"Dermal regenerator," Tubbo spoke up. "What?" he demanded after Tommy frowned at him. "I have a sister in the medical field."

"Yeah, that," Tommy said finally. "For my face."

"I'm surprised foam balls do so much damage," Wilbur muttered. "Maybe it's because you have baby skin."

Tommy scowled as Dream snickered. "Fuck off, prick. No, it's because I was failing so miserably that Drista thought it would be entertaining—well, the actual word she used is motivating, but I think she did it because her blood is actually made of pure spite. Anyway, she replaced the foam balls."

"Ah," Dream said. "That's a very...Drista thing to do."

"And certainly against regulation," Phil said.

"Phil, she has a gun that I have no doubt she stole from the *Mira*," he said. "And she replaced the foam balls with golf balls." He paused. "*Not* the hollow ones."

"Ouch," Techno whistled. "How'd you survive?"

"Well," he said, grimacing slightly. "I wasn't ever able to deflect them, I mean."

"Sure seems like you were," Wilbur said. "With your face."

Tommy opted to ignore the Phantom. "After the first one hit me, I completely booked it. She didn't follow me—far. I ran. Very fast. I am extremely fast."

"Doesn't matter," Purpled cut in. "Momentum temporis."

"The fuck?" Wilbur said, raising an eyebrow. "Latin? Where'd you learn Latin?"

"Okay," Tommy sighed. "Take me to Ranboob."

"That's...that's not what he said, though," Wilbur called after them as Tommy walked over to the elevator.

"It wouldn't be a secret language if you understood it," Tommy said.

"It's no secret, it's *Latin*," Techno said patiently, and Tommy raised his eyes to the heavens and wondered how many people aboard this ship knew Latin. "And that Purpled said means 'time moment'. Or, precisely, moment of time." He frowned. "Is that your secret meetin' callout?"

"I mean, I suppose," Purpled said.

"Why Latin?" Phil asked curiously.

Purpled paused at the doorway of the elevator, meeting Tommy's eyes. He shrugged a bit, nodding. "Because Chroma didn't know Latin," he said simply, and Tommy, who was mostly looking at the wall, only saw Wilbur's face contort into about fifty different expressions before he settled on understanding. "And I gotta get Tommy to talk to Ranboo and I some way."

"Hey!" he protested. "I'm good at talking!"

Tubbo snorted loudly. "That's the biggest fucking lie I've ever heard," he said, and Tommy flipped him off. "Don't go denying it."

"I didn't say anything," he said stiffly.

"I'd stab him if he did," Purpled said bluntly. Tommy was only thirty percent sure that the Human was lying.

He pulled out his own knife. "I'll stab you first, bitch."

"Now, *hold* on a minute—" Phil said.

"Phil," Techno said, sounding slightly panicked. Tommy snickered as he saw that Mellohi had jumped up into his lap, Ca'at wandering over to see what the other dhi'sk was doing. "Phil, help."

"Relax, mate," the captain told him, glancing away. Tommy noted the smirk on his face before he schooled his face to neutralness and turned back to his First Officer.

"Because everything is going to be okay?" Techno said, raising an eyebrow as Mellohi made another chittering noise.

"No, because they can smell fear," Phil said. Tommy could have sworn that a slight whimper of fear escaped the half-Piglin as Wilbur fell out of his chair, his silent laughter uproariously filling the bridge. Dream was choking, eyes watering from mirth, and Tommy wasn't much surprised.

The elevator doors shut, and Tommy put away his knife with a slight flourish that he half-messed up. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Pogtopia," Purpled said, shifting his head slightly. "Obviously."

"Obviously," Tommy repeated. "Specifically?"

"I think we should go," Purpled said.

"Go where?"

The Human boy snorted and elbowed them as the door slid open to reveal the seventh floor. "Don't be daft," he scoffed. "You know what I mean."

Tommy paused in the middle of the hallway, pursing his lips slightly. "No," he said softly. "I don't think I do."

Purpled threw up his hands. "Pogtopia," he said again. "We should go."

"Ah," Tommy said, the word sticking in his throat as he swallowed. "Yout want to...visit?"

"They say that they found the cure," the magenta-eyed boy said as he led Tommy down the hallway. There was a slight pause as they passed by Hannah, who gave the two boys an odd look, but didn't stop them. "To the famine, I mean. The thing that was killing the plants."

"Oh," Tommy said, and he was not sure whether he was happy or sad.

"When I went, the grass was still brown," Purpled continued. "But...they say that some of it is golden again."

"Who's *they*?" he demanded, almost angrily.

Purpled threw him an unfathomable. "The outpost there, run by the Galactic Rebellion. Scientists, chemists, gastronomists, reporters...and historians."

"Why do you want to go back?" he asked warily.

"Because I want to say hello to Alyssa, Foolish, and Grian again," Purpled replied. "They have a memorial for the Red Planet's Genocide. And we're going to be stopping near that system for fuel."

"Have you asked Phil?"

"I'm not going to ask *anyone*," Purpled said in a scathing sneer. "It is our right. It is—it is our past."

"Still," Tommy said. "You should."

"He'll say yes," the boy said. "He will."

"You can't know that."

"I'm going to sneak off anyway, and he knows that," Purpled said. "I need to say hello again—and you need to say goodbye."

"The fuck does that mean?" he demanded, as Purpled paused in front of one of the many diplomatic meeting rooms that were, in times like this, unoccupied.

"You've never been to Pogtopia since the Fall, have you?" Purpled asked him.

"I've never been free since the Red Planet's Genocide save for these past months," Tommy replied wryly, his lips twitching with a touch of sadness. "Since when was it called the Fall?"

"The same reason that the kids started calling it the Children's Rebellion, even though we never had a name to start," Purpled shrugged, keying in a code. Tommy blinked, not really surprised when he saw Ranboo sitting on one of the couches, reading something on his datapad.

The Enderian looked up when they entered, his red and green eyes blinking slightly. "Oh, hey guys!"

"Don't *hey* me, boob boy," he grumbled.

"That's—that's not my name," Ranboo said with a slight frown.

"I know," he said with a slight grin as he sat down on one of the couches across from the heterochromatic-eyed boy. "But it's a title. And it suits you."

"Let's not delve into this discussion, shall we?" Purpled sighed as he closed the door and sat on the loveseat cross-legged. What a monster. Who sat *cross-legged* on a chair? "Let's talk about Pogtopia."

"Let's not," Tommy said.

"Shut up, Tommy," Purpled said immediately. "Anyway, I want to visit it." There was a moment of silence. "No argument?"

"I think you'd chuck a knife at me and blackmail me into thinking I was in the five stages of grief," Ranboo said in a small voice. "But. Yeah. I think—um, I think that's a goo—that's an idea. Yeah."

"Thank you for your valuable input, Ranboo," Purpled said. "Tommy?"

"Will I get a knife thrown at me if I disagree?"

"I can't say you *wouldn't* have a blade buried in your head."

Tommy sighed, thinking about it. "What if we—what if *I*, or we, whatever—did an interview or something? Like, with me. Because I'm important." He didn't know why he was saying that, but the words were out, so...

Ranboo and Purpled both turned to stare at him. "You're willing to *do* that?" the Human gaped.

"Well..." Tommy said, cracking a weak grin. "Better now than later, innit?"

"That's the smartest thing that's ever come out of your mouth in all the years I've known you," Purpled said warmly, and Tommy scowled at him and flipped him off.

"Are you sure, Tommy?" Ranboo said, black and white eyebrows furrowing. "This is very random."

"I like to think of myself as a do-before-you-think type of person," he said snottily.

"That explains quite a lot," Purpled said humorously before turning serious again as he crossed his arms. "An interview, Tommy? Really?"

"Well, the press is always harassing you," he pointed out, to which Purpled and Ranboo both shrugged in unison. "So I say we give them something, you know? Before they break down our halls and put cameras everywhere."

"They don't even know you exist."

"Oh, they will," he said. "They will."

There was a moment of subdued silence.

"Well, I'm not opposed to it," Purpled said finally. "I mean, better now before we end up fucking dying, right?" He was only half-joking, bitterness in his eyes, and Tommy chose not to comment on it.

Ranboo coughed. "Um—yeah, I'm fine with it. Just getting my memories back, though—don't expect me to, uh, say much."

Tommy reached over and patted the Enderian across the back awkwardly. "Don't sweat it, Big Man. They'll probably ask stupid questions anyway."

"Adults always do," Purpled snorted.

Tommy coughed. "I—um, I actually have something to confess."

"You married Tubbo?" Ranboo said, raising an eyebrow.

"WHAT?" he choked out, nearly falling out of his seat in surprise. "NO! What the *fuck*?"

"Okay, well, it shouldn't be too bad, then," Ranboo shrugged.

"That's not how surprises work," Purpled said with a wry grin. "Also—not that I'm astonished—but why does your quantity of secrets outnumber your age?"

"Shut it, bitch," he groused. "Anyway, it's about the death list." Purpled went silent, head tilting to the side, magenta eyes glittering. "Would you *stop* doing that, Oranged?"

"Don't call me that."

"You look like a wolf circling a bunny."

"You are hardly a bunny," the Human retorted. Tommy wasn't quite sure if that was a compliment.

"I lied," he admitted. "About—uh, about the death list." Ranboo pursed his lips, leaning forward curiously. "Purpled. You—uh, you weren't on that. Nor was Foolish."

"Oh," Purpled said.

"Oh," Tommy repeated, swallowing slightly.

"I knew that," Purpled said.

Tommy blinked at him. "What?"

"Yeah, you're dogshit at hacking," the magenta-eyed boy snorted. "Tubbo hacked into the records when they first rescued us—he noticed your shitty attempt within seconds. After we ran away, you put Foolish and me in there—they didn't notice two more kids whose bodies would never be found." He shrugged uncertainly.

"But you said..."

"I said that because everyone thinks that I was on the list," Purpled said absently. "And I didn't want to have an argument with a self-sacrificial partially suicidal friend about being an idiot."

Ranboo raised his hand awkwardly. "Ah," he said. "*I* didn't know that."

"You don't know much, memory boy," Tommy snorted, and Ranboo rolled his eyes. Purpled snorted quietly.

"At least he's not a shit liar."

"I'm *not* a shit liar—"

» **If it means anything, Tommy, then *I* am glad that you are back aboard this vessel.** «

"Thank you, Clementine. At least someone cares."

"She's an A.I. She's not a person. Glad to know that *nobody* cares about you."

"Shut the fuck up."

There and back again

Chapter Notes

Posting this chapter a bit early because my friend is gonna be on a plane trip tomorrow and she wants to read it now :P

"I'm no hero. Heroes don't come back.

*Survivors return home. Heroes
never come home. If anyone thinks I'm a hero,
I'm not."*

- Bob Feller

"So," Phil said, leaning against the wall, arms crossed and eyebrows raised. In Tommy's oh-so-humble opinion, he did not look pleased in the slightest. "When were you going to tell me that you planned to visit F970-RB?"

"What," Tommy said, thoroughly confused.

"That's the scientific name for the Red Planet," Ranboo muttered under his breath.

"Okay," he said, holding up his hands as Phil narrowed his gaze on him. "I *may* be the leader of the Children's Rebellion, but that was *not* my idea." He pointed at Purpled. "It was his."

"But it was your idea to do an interview," the Human said with a smirk, not looking apologetic in the slightest.

Phil rubbed his forehead. "Interview? What—actually, I don't want to know." The Elytrian sighed. "So, let me get this straight. When we stopped at the space station for three days, you were planning on *sneaking off* and taking a transport to Pogtopia?"

"Yep," Purpled said, mouth twisting. "I'm just wondering who snitched."

» That would be me, Purpled. «

"Clementine, you traitor," Tommy hissed, glancing up at the ceiling as Ranboo started quietly. Purpled merely raised an eyebrow—perhaps he had guessed, or perhaps he already knew that Clementine would snitch.

**» It is not I that was creeping behind the backs of my captain to plan a trip to another planet.
«**

"Traitor," he mumbled again.

» For me to be a traitor, I would have had to be on your side in the first place. «

"Clem, I think you forget the fact you didn't tell us that Tommy was the leader of the Children's Rebellion *and* the son of Sam Innes?" Phil said wryly.

» It is coded into my very being not to give away information on my creator. That includes any offspring that he may have. It was also in good faith that Quartermaster Purpled

confided in me about the whereabouts of Tommy. Why, my files had him labeled as *DECEASED* until he informed me that Tommy was dead...again. «

"How many times have I been dead, now?" Tommy muttered.

"Too many," Purpled said with a slight sneer that's only half annoyed.

Ranboo coughed. "So—so, are we in trouble?" he asked.

Phil sighed, wings going slightly limp and just barely brushing the floor. "You kids are *literally* going to be the death of me," he grumbled.

"That's not a no," Tommy whispered loudly.

"Yes, Tommy Innes," Phil said. "It's not a no." Tommy whooped loudly, pumping his arm.

"FUCK YEAH!" he cheered.

"Really?" Purpled said, crossing his arms, looking pleasantly surprised and—of course, it's *Purpled*—suspicious. "Just like that?"

"No, you have to take Techno with you."

Tommy paused in his victory dance. "Why the pig man?"

"The—*what?*" Phil sputtered, blinking at him rapidly. Both Purpled and Ranboo descended into a coughing fit. Complete coincidence, of course. "You've been spending too much time with Wil."

"He's *your* son."

"He's an uncontrollable chaotic little shit."

"That's what a bad father says."

Phil stared at him. "Did you just call me a bad dad?" he snorted.

"Yes," Tommy deadpanned.

"I've changed my mind; you guys can't go to Pogtopia." Phil scowled at the three of them, rolling his eyes. Purpled snickered under his breath, muttering something about older people.

"So..." Ranboo said. "When, exactly, are we getting there?"

According to the wonderful star maps that Techno provided after a little bit—note: three hours' worth of annoying the commander—it would take two weeks of flying to get to the space dock to refuel. Apparently, warp was not necessary, seeing as they had *all the time in the world* or some shit, and there was *absolutely no rush*—Phil's words of wisdom, not his.

Tommy was slightly annoyed, but not really. Honestly, there was no rush. He wasn't scared. At all. Nope.

In *Purpled's* words of extreme wisdom—"It's not like the bodies are going to die again, eh?"

He'd thought that was funny. Bad had not.

Tommy shifted and rolled out of bed, wiping his eyes and glancing at the clock. 0100, just great. He groaned quietly, blinking away the scratchiness in the corners, and padded to the door, where a soft scratching sound was emitting from.

Mellohi, in all her epicness—white and purple-specked eyes and all—chirped up at him from where she sat on her haunches on the hallway floor. Tommy groaned again, stepping aside to let the stupid dhi'sk inside. Without fail, and no matter how much she seemed to hate Tommy, she would scratch at his door an hour to three hours after midnight and demand to be let in. And every time, Tommy let her in, and she'd walk daintily to his bed, curling up in his pillow.

He'd had to get two because she'd hog the other one, but every time he did, it would get mysteriously destroyed.

Tommy sighed and rubbed his eyes as he watched Mellohi turn around thrice before plopping on his warm pillow. She opened a single eye balefully to stare at him, as if saying, *Well? Are you coming?*

"Sorry, Mellohi," he said, actually feeling a bit ashamed, even if she woke him up consistently by shoving her fuzzy ass in his face. "Feeling a bit of insomnia." He stepped outside the still-open door and closed it quietly, the dim lights of the hallway—bright compared to his room—making him blink.

Tommy shoved his hands in his sleep clothes' pockets and started trekking down the hall, his sock-clad feet barely making a sound on the shiny floor. The cameras in the corners blinked with red light, and he knew that Clementine's sleeping mind was watching him—meaning that even if the A.I herself didn't say anything; it would be stored in her databanks.

In nine days, he would see Pogtopia again. Nine days—nine days, nine *fucking* days, and his nightmares would be brought to life. He knew that, Purpled knew that, Ranboo knew that—and yet the three of them went anyway, to commemorate the people that only they could.

Tommy paused outside the rec room, noting the dim light that was assuredly *not* regulation—not like the dusky lights of the hallway were—and the soft music notes that swirled into the cool air from the crack in the entrance. He hesitated for a second before putting up a hand and pushing the door open, glad that they were oiled regularly and didn't squeak or hiss much. He tilted his head as he noted the brown-haired man that sat on a small stool, humming some words under his breath as he paused at his song—not because he noticed Tommy, because he hadn't.

Tommy watched with silent interest as Wilbur adjusted one of the tuning pegs with a practiced hand before he went back to strumming the strings, singing a few catchy notes one by one and stopping, tilting his head as he thought about his own music.

It was...beautiful, Tommy thought, though it was more homely than the violin. He thought it was a guitar—perhaps it was—and it was *definitely* antique if the golden letters that glinted on the corner of it had anything to do with its age.

Then again, Wilbur *was* the Chief Communications Officer. He was unquestionably well-off.

Tommy watched for a few more minutes as the Phantom slowly put together a song—a few jumbled notes becoming a chorus and a bridge and so much more, and though it wasn't complete, not by far, it was *something*. He thought of Sniff's violin—technically his, now—in his room under his bed and shook his head. No, no, not today.

When Wilbur looked up, there was nothing in the entrance but the slight shift of the door as it went back to where it had been before Tommy had disturbed it.

Tommy wondered when Wilbur slept, because it certainly wasn't at nighttime. No, this was his third day in a row watching the Phantom—and no, it wasn't *creepy*—okay, maybe it was, but he was just listening to Wilbur's music. And he only watched for like fifteen minutes, popping in briefly to see what changes the Phantom had made to his song.

He'd added more words tonight.

Tommy hadn't even known he *played* or made music until three days ago. He was good, too. Very good, if his songs were a bit... complicated. They had a meaning that Tommy probably wasn't supposed to understand but did.

He turned to leave again.

"Tommy?"

Tommy started, swallowing nervously as he turned to face Wilbur. "Um. H-hey. I was just—you know. Yeah."

"You bet," the Phantom said, putting a hand over the strings to silence them, a wry grin on his face. "How long have you been watching?"

"Five minutes," he said. "Okay, ten. Fifteen, *max*."

Wilbur didn't seem too creeped out by his stalkerish behavior, which was good. The Phantom only tilted his head, genuine curiosity on his face. "Did you like it?"

"What?" Tommy asked, confused.

"Did you like it?" Wilbur said, tilting his head. "I wrote it."

"I know you did, Big Man," he said softly. "It's—yeah, I like it."

"Something's off," the Phantom noted. "What's up?"

Tommy sighed. "Hits a bit too close to home," he admitted. "Not—not the Terran part. Whatever city you were talking about."

"London?"

"Yeah, that shithole. Whatever. Not that part. About...you know, leaving. Leaving is always worse than dying because you know they're alive out there somewhere, and it hurts because they're not with you." Tommy walked back into the room and all but collapsed on one of the rec room couches, crossing his arms.

Wilbur was frowning, but not in disgust or dismay. More like...in deep thought. "Is this about Purpled and Ranboo?" he asked finally. "Or Rae?"

Tommy sat up, blinking. "Huh?"

"Like," Wilbur started, cutting himself off. "Like when you left to try to get your petty revenge on—on Chroma." Tommy didn't answer. "You're not yelling at me for critiquing your decisions."

"It was a shit decision, Wil," Tommy snorted. "Also, it's three in the fucking morning." Closer to two, actually, but whatever. "I'm not gonna wake up the entire ship with my yells of superiority." He shrugged. "And—and, okay, you're not *wrong*."

"Wow," Wilbur smirked, standing up and putting his guitar back on the stand near the stool he'd sat on for nights on end without fail. "The great Tommy Innes, admitting that I am, in fact, superior."

"I never said that," he muttered stubbornly, putting up his foot as Wilbur sat down nearly on top of them. "Get *off*, you dickhead!"

"Aw, it's okay, Toms," Wilbur crooned, reaching over with the lanky-ass arms of his and rubbing the top of Tommy's head forcefully. He kicked the Phantom's arm in response, but Wilbur smirked, and his eyes glowed forcefully, and Tommy's leg went right through his forearm. "You can admit that I'm always right!"

"No fair!" he squealed as about a hundred and ninety pounds of Wilbur started to crush him. "Foul! Foul!"

"Ah, the benefits of being one of the most powerful Phantoms in existence," Wilbur said, as Tommy lay defeated, staring at the ceiling, Wilbur's head crushing his chest. His legs were falling asleep.

"Do I detect a hint of smugness?"

"Says one of the last Avians left alive."

"That's not true," he snorted. "Rae and Sykkuno are very nice people."

Wilbur was silent for a moment. "Tommy," he said slowly. "Aren't Avians supposed to travel in flocks?"

Tommy swallowed, thinking of the bond beyond his mental walls—he'd practiced for hours and hours, and now he could keep them up in his sleep—to the Avian female aboard the *Mira*, lightyears away. Even now, he could point out her general direction, should he choose to. "I—I mean, yeah, we're more powerful together."

"So why didn't you go with them?" Wilbur asked. "I know they invited you."

"Because..." Tommy said, trailing off slightly. "They're my friends, but I suppose you guys are my family."

And if Philza came in the morning to wake up Wilbur for Alpha shift—the Phantom usually slept on the couch—and he saw Tommy and Wilbur lying together, fast asleep, the younger boy now curled up on the older boy, he didn't say anything. He smiled, closed the door, and dismissed his son—sons?—from Alpha shift.

He was the captain, after all.

Wilbur finished the song six days later, and played it for Tommy at four in the morning. It was a wonder they got anything done with the sheer insomnia that the two of them had.

It was called Jubilee Line, and when Wilbur finished, Tommy cheered loudly and clapped his hands. The Phantom looked happier than he had—not *ever*, Tommy thought, but in a while.

As they drew closer and closer to Pogtopia—or, instead, the space dock that had a transport that would take the four of them to the Red Planet—Tommy began to sleep less and less. Perhaps it was *nervousness* that led him to wander the ship at night. Sometimes Wilbur joined him.

Other times, it was Techno. Surprisingly, the half-Piglin had insomnia as well—though, when Tommy asked why, Techno had grumbled something about fighting away the spirits of his Piglin ancestors. Tommy did not understand in the slightest, but he really didn't want to get into some sort of religious-historical discussion, so he took it and left it. Sometimes he sat beside Techno in the ship's library—which he'd only recently learned existed—and listened to the commander ramble on about myths from different species and all the problems in society. And things about anarchy. Sometimes they read in silence from books—Techno's usually were Terran translations about strategy and mythology, and Tommy's almost always were fantastical epics strictly *barring* romance.

One time, Tommy grumbled about his haircut at approximately five in the morning while flipping through the pages of a physical copy of the second book in a series named *The Wheel of Time*. It had a Terran author that had died halfway through making the series, and an Avian author had taken up the mantle for the final three books, according to Techno. The books themselves were prints of the originals made about three centuries prior. While it was wordy and seemingly outdated, Tommy had to admit that he was fascinated with the characters and how quickly they balanced the lines of good and evil.

Techno looked up sharply when Tommy had mentioned getting someone to cut his hair, and if looks could kill, Tommy would have been incinerated in the armchair that he sat in.

"Why don't you braid it?" the half-Piglin said finally, his eye twitching slightly.

Tommy reached up and brushed his hair behind his shoulder, making it messier than his permanent bedhead had ever made it. Techno twitched again. It was brushing his shoulders now, just barely—longer than Wilbur's, but far shorter than Philza and Techno. "I don't know how to braid," he said finally. "I mean, I never got the chance to learn. Alyssa always kept hers in a half-up style, and she's like...the only woman I knew after...you know." He swallowed. He'd told Bad *literally that day* that he was able to talk about his parent's death freely. Apparently not.

Techno's eyes softened, and he put his datapad aside, where he'd been scrolling through—signing paperwork, Tommy thought. About what, he didn't know. Tommy knew what Purpled's paperwork had been—Purpled had had to sign off all of the child wellness forms; all six of them—and had

complained about it every chance that he'd met with Tommy in the halls and at lunch. Tommy did not doubt that everyone within hearing distance of Purpled had heard him complain.

He was suddenly jealous of all the engineers and science officers that didn't traverse the main halls fifty percent of the time.

"I can—" Techno halted. "Is it okay if—"

Tommy raised an eyebrow at the half-Piglin. "Has the great Technoblade finally used up all his words?"

Technoblade leaned forward until his braid fell foremost across his shoulder. He bared his fangs slightly, pearly white teeth gleaming in the dim lighting. Somehow, Tommy couldn't find himself to be all that scared—Techno wouldn't hurt him. "At least I had words in the first place, nerd."

"Hey!" he sputtered, sitting up straighter and then angrily tossing his head back as his hair fell in front of his eyes. "I'm speaking, aren't I?"

"Are you?"

"Shut up, pig boy," he grumbled, picking up his book from where it'd fallen and carefully taking note of the page. Techno would actually kill him if he dog-eared his pages. He *was* scared of that.

The half-Piglin stared at him for an astonishingly long period of time without blinking. Eyes watering, Tommy narrowed his own cerulean ones, unwilling to lose.

He lost, and Technoblade scoffed.

"Weak."

He threw up his hands in feigned disgust. "Well, I'm sorry I don't spend ninety percent of my life practicing staring contests. I have a life, unlike you."

"Expect the unexpected," Techno said, raising a pale eyebrow.

"That's not how the unexpected works," Tommy said, annoyed. "If it's unexpected, then it wouldn't be expected, and if it's—" he cut himself off, rolling his eyes as Techno snorted, clearly having jibed him. "You're a bitch."

"Let me braid your hair," Techno demanded, though Tommy, having known him for a few months, could detect the hints of fondness that shone through the rough tone. "Don't—don't chop it off."

"Ah, is that why Phil has long hair?" he asked jokingly.

"Yes," Technoblade said bluntly. He toed the spot at his legs. "Come. Sit."

"What am I, a dog?" Tommy grumbled under his breath.

"You're an annoyin' child," the half-Piglin said as Tommy got up and sat facing parallel to the commander's knees, so his back rested against Techno's shins. "Dogs are...bearable."

"Dogs can't talk," he snapped.

"Which is why they are bearable," Technoblade pointed out gruffly, and Tommy turned around to glare at him. The half-Piglin stopped him from doing so by putting a hand on his head and keeping his face firmly facing forwards. "Sit."

"Now I *am* a dog," he complained.

"Well-behaved dogs would know better."

"I hate you," Tommy grumbled, and was rewarded with a sharp yank of his hair. "HEY! That fucking hurt, you prick!"

"Sorry, my finger slipped," Techno said unapologetically. Tommy muttered something unflattering under his breath. "Your hair is a tragedy."

"The fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"You seem like the person to use three-in-one in the shower."

"I do *not*," he scoffed. "After years of using that shit the Arachnids gave me in the Wasteland, Purpled showed me the good stuff. I *do not* use three-in-one. Or two-in-one."

"Half of your hair is nearing split ends."

"Bitch," Tommy snarled, only half-meaning it. Already he felt like half the hair that was usually hanging over his face was out of it, and there was a tiny braid that was maybe two inches long that Technoblade yanked and tied back with a small band that he had gotten from...somewhere.

"There," Technoblade said encouragingly, as Tommy drew out his—new—datapad and opened the camera app, looking left and right to see what the pig had done. "Already looking less like a child."

"Wilbur would disagree," he said, and hesitated. "But—but, uh, thanks." He reached up and fingered the braid. "It feels better."

Technoblade's eyes glittered with astonishment, but all the commander said was, "It looks better."

Tommy fiddled with the band on his wrist that Kristin had given him, courtesy of someone named Spifey, who was a technical engineer aboard the *L'manburg*. Instead of having a tracker ingrained

in his wrist—it hadn't healed fully thanks to the time spent on Icarus-45HB, and there was a small puckered scar—the engineers and science officers had gotten together to design a neat piece of technology nicknamed the *Child Chaser*. It would give out a signal far more potent than the one that had once lain under his skin and would also send out a signal if it were taken off or severely damaged.

Purpled and Ranboo wore one too, but they didn't seem as bothered about it as Tommy did. He wasn't bothered because the crew was tracking him, nor because they didn't trust him enough—he got into enough trouble for it to be needed—but because they were given to the three of them before anyone else. He was sure it had to do with the fact that they were going on a pseudo mission far before everyone else—in fact, everyone else was relaxing for a few days at the space station.

Still, it unsettled him. There were far more important people than him for this precious and ingenious piece of technology. Still, he bit his lip and stood up as the transport taxi taking them to the Red Planet neared the ground; the telltale signs of gravity reaching up with its prying claws to get at that which flew.

"It has changed since you last saw it," Purpled murmured under his breath, reaching over and flicking Tommy's arm helpfully. He scowled at the magenta-eyed Human, a little tidbit of unease trickling down his spine. "Be prepared."

"Is it...different?" he asked, finding the words difficult to force out.

"Yes," Purpled said.

After all these years, they—the remaining members of the Children's Rebellion—would return to Pogtopia. Purpled and Ranboo had been before, though the few memories that the Enderian was slowly gaining back did not help much.

Tommy had hoped, had *prayed* that he would never go back. That he would never have to see such a place filled with nightmares and fears again.

And yet...here he was.

He was suddenly glad the windows were tinted at the moment. Standing here, in front of the door, and reaching out to grab a railing as the ship came to a shuddering landing on the planet he had dreaded for months and months, was already too much. Being here was too much.

"It's okay," Ranboo said, his hand touching Tommy's palm, the Enderian tilting his head as he looked at Tommy for the go-ahead. When Tommy didn't immediately pull away, his friend tentatively clasped his fingers.

Purpled didn't care so much for boundaries and grabbed Tommy's other palm, his slightly sticky from sweat. Tommy wrinkled his nose at the Human, who stuck out his tongue.

Technoblade hovered in the back, unwilling to get in the way of the three of them.

» Thank you for taking the Intergalactic Express. You have reached your destination of Pogtopia. Have a good trip! «

The mechanical voice of the artificial intelligence lightly reverberated around Tommy's brain, making him blink. His mouth was dry, and he realized he was squeezing the two palms of his friends.

The bay doors opened, and Tommy blinked into the dazzling sunlight of F970-RB—codenamed the Red Planet, and home to every nightmare he had ever had.

Driver's License (no, not the song)

Chapter Notes

as a prize for reaching 500 followers on twitter, here is another chapter.

*"Straight roads do not make
skillful drivers."*

- Unknown

The first thing that Tommy noticed was that the grass had grown back. The sunlight hit him in a blast—perhaps moderate temperature—and he blinked to shield his paler eyes from the heat.

It would be about early spring F970-RB time right now. Shorter than Terra seasons. The planet spun a bit faster.

His lips parted slightly as he stared at the golden grass that waved in the wind, about two and a half feet high. The planet was covered in it, for the most part, barring the bits of ocean and mountains—yet the majority were golden fields. He blinked back tears as he stared at the vegetation.

The last time he had been here, he had stepped upon brown and had winced as it crunched under his feet with blood and bodies. The last time he had stood here, breathed this air, he had been fifteen—he had left Purpled and Ranboo alone and stupidly, *childishly*, gone for revenge. The last time he had been here, he had watched his friends get murdered in chains of steel and had watched rebellion and fire bloom in the eyes of those oppressed.

He had run from this place long ago.

Now he was back.

Tommy took his first step off the stairs, watching as familiar bugs hopped away from his feet as he crushed blades of yellow wheat. He'd let go of Ranboo and Purpled's hands, but they followed him onto the sunny field nonetheless.

He frowned as he noticed Pogtopia—it hadn't been fixed or even touched, and even from here, he could see massive lengths of Alyssa's long-lasting paint upon the walls. About a mile in the distance, a small town rose in the distance—Purpled had said it was a historian and science lab used for gathering information and testing the disease that had once run rampant on the planet. A small hovertrain station led from the landing platform to the town, passing almost two hundred yards from the remnants of Pogtopia.

"It's the same," he murmured, surprised, ignoring Techno's heavy footfalls as the half-Piglin joined them on the grass as well. He winced slightly as the transport left them, taking air back into space.

"It's preserved," Purpled corrected absentmindedly, shielding his eyes from the brightness of the sun. "They do tours."

"They *what*?" he said, suddenly mad.

Purpled gave him a frank look. "When you were supposed to do your final on Bree'lysn, where a hundred and twenty people died due to an avalanche, they would have shown you the death site as well. That's how historic sites *work*."

"It's not historical; it happened two and a half years ago," he said through gritted teeth.

"History only means concerning past events," Ranboo said amicably.

"Shut up, boob boy," he muttered.

"They're not making fun of us," Purpled told him. "But I never had the guts to do a tour either." He glanced at his watch. "We have four hours before the interview."

"Interview?" Techno grunted, the first words that had left his mouth for over half an hour.

Purpled glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah. On galactic broadcast. History Channel four-oh-five."

Techno blinked at him. "I've watched that."

"It's the main one for interviews of survivors of massacres," Purpled said, waving him off. "Which, you know. We are." Technoblade inclined his head slightly.

Sometimes Tommy forgot that.

They took the hovertrain to the town, which was called Logsteadshire, and Tommy put his hands on the railings—it was an open train, with no other passengers—and watched as Pogtopia passed them in a blur. The orange paint wasn't even chipped, from what he could see, though the blood and bodies had long ago been cleared off the streets. He swallowed when he noted the only change to the place he had called home so long ago—a mausoleum on the northern outskirts made of white marble.

Beyond the mausoleum, hundreds and thousands of gravestones reflected the sunlight that streamed upon the planet. Thousands.

Tommy saw the dormitory—one for the born-boys and one for the born-girls—and the far-off warehouses that had been their downfall close to a mountain range that glistened with unmelted snow. He saw the streets and looked away from the preserved wooden stage that had once been the residency of the executions and the majority of the deaths in Pogtopia. He gritted his teeth and tried not to hear the gunfire and the dejected noises of applauding that had once rung out from starving and bloodied children.

Beside him, Purpled and Ranboo were silent. Technoblade stood tall and watched the dead town as well, but he did not have the flashbacks in his eyes that the three of them—even Ranboo, who, according to Niki and Tubbo, had been slowly regaining some of his memories—had.

Tommy watched Pogtopia pass with a grim frown and wind whipping through his hair, glad that at least the brown grass had been revived to its beautiful golden washed in red from the late-day sun.

He glanced towards the hills—the opposite way of the mountain range—and wondered if anybody had ever found the cave in the forest. The silence was too thick to break, and so Tommy bit his lip and kept quiet.

Eventually, it was Ranboo who broke the silence, far after they had passed Pogtopia and moved on towards Logsteadshire.

"You know," the Enderian said, turning his half-white half-black face towards Tommy, who looked up at him. "When I first recovered in the medbay, all I wanted to was remember." The silence grew heavier as Ranboo paused, hesitating. "And now—now that I finally *am*, I feel like this terrible person who wanted to know so much about Pogtopia and just *couldn't remember*." He laughed dryly, rubbing at his face and throwing up his hands. "I was jealous, you know? And it—and it was stupid because what happened was appalling and disgusting—but I wanted to remember, even as I watched Purpled—and eventually Tommy, you know—cry and break down over this horrible, horrible event—and I was jealous that I couldn't remember."

Tommy stared at him sadly. He wasn't exactly mad at the Enderian—not at all, because while he and Purpled had sat with shared experiences and memories, Ranboo did not remember what they had endured, despite being one of three survivors. Ranboo did not remember what he'd been through to survive.

"That does not make you a bad person," Technoblade said gruffly, when neither Tommy nor Purpled responded. The half-Piglin cringed slightly as all three kids looked at him. "Look—I know I'm probably not the person to say this, but—kid, it *doesn't*." Ranboo frowned, scrubbing at the tears that were giving him lines on his face. "Whether you like it or not, you are part of this history." Techno swung his hand wide, wind blowing furiously through his braided hair as the train continued on its path towards Logsteadshire. "And it is perfectly natural, as a bein' of this universe, to be jealous of somethin' you can't remember."

"But—but it's *horrible*," Ranboo cried out, red and green eyes flashing with self-hatred and melancholy. "The more I remember, the more I want to forget—and yet some part of me craves each horrific memory that I get because I don't want to forget, and yet I *do*—"

"There is a saying that goes as such—those who remember want to forget, and those that forget want to remember even as they see others crumble to the ground from uniformly dreadful recollections. Yes, they will hate themselves with each passing day, and yet they desire such a past—because the more you want to forget something, the more you seem to remember it." Tommy

shoved his hands in his civilian jeans, shrugging slightly at the three dumbstruck faces that turned to look at him.

"Who said that?" Techno said curiously.

"I did," he said primly. "Just now." Technoblade cracked a wry smile, and Purpled sighed and glanced up at the heavens. Ranboo, however, didn't seem that placified. "And you know what, Ranboo?"

"What?" the Enderian said in a low voice as the train started slowing down, reaching the modernized town made of logs and metal.

"I was jealous too," Tommy admitted, glancing upwards at the red sky. He smiled a bit, remembering why it was red—a question he had asked many times when he had lived here and had never gotten an answer. "Of you." Ranboo frowned. "I was jealous that you didn't remember what haunted my nightmares in the darkness." The Enderian glanced away, swallowing, and Tommy reached up and grabbed his shoulder, forcing the boy to look back at him. "But guess what? I would never give up those memories for anything." A flash of surprise crossed Ranboo's face. "Because—because I came to this conclusion months and months ago, before they even started experimenting on me—" He was reminded of the efforts that the science lab and the medical officers had gone through to reduce his sleeping problems and smiled inwardly. "—that I wouldn't give up those memories for *anything*. That they were awful, and shameful—" he ticked off each finger for every adjective. "—and terrible and traumatizing, but they are *my* past, and it is *my* future that depends on the lessons I learn from my history."

"Those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it," Technoblade muttered, and Ranboo blanched.

Tommy inclined his head. "Yeah. That. I hate it, Ranboo." He sighed. "I hate that my nightmares are full of bloody dreams. But giving that up—forgetting the people I loved—still love—Grian and Alyssa and Foolish? That would be even worse—because I wouldn't remember the good times."

"There were good times?" Ranboo asked him, hope glimmering in his eyes.

Tommy smiled. "Yes," he admitted. "There is a reason that my favorite color is gold." He sighed again. "Yeah, it got worse in the end." Purpled snorted. "Really bad," he amended. "Horrifically bad. And—yeah, this place sucked, and I wouldn't wish it on my greatest enemy."

"Your greatest enemy is Chroma," Purpled reminded him.

"Okay, maybe I'd wish it on my greatest enemy," he said, and Techno snorted. "But *anyway*, when I crashed on that planet—uh, Icarus-HP—"

"Icarus-45HB," Ranboo corrected.

"Shut it, memory boy," he hissed, and Ranboo rolled his eyes. "It doesn't matter. When Drista, Lani, and I were on that planet, I was calm. Calmer." He tilted his head. "Sort of. I mean, I don't think they entirely realized what danger they were in."

"Are you insinuating that they were stupid?" Purpled said amicably.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "As *if*," he said. "No, that's not what I meant. I mean—technically, it was an abandoned planet. We should have died."

"Yeah, fortunately, you landed on the same planet that Sykkuno and Valkyrae were stranded on years ago," Technoblade pointed out dryly. "What kind of luck do you have?"

"Absolute shit luck," he replied, and Technoblade frowned but nodded. "I mean, it had to balance out *somewhere*, right?"

"I don't believe in karma."

"Doesn't matter," he said, as the train finally halted at the station in Logsteadshire. Tommy stepped off onto the paved ground, noting that there were few people around—probably only two hundred in total in the entire town, most wearing the coats of Galactic Rebellion scientists and other sigils that probably meant historians. "We should have died." He hesitated, and Purpled took the lead, heading towards a small building. "And—well, I opened the pod door without knowing if the air was even breathable, but it was the right thing to do because we would have run out of air, or predators would have found the pod and camped out until we were forced to go out. And—we should have run out of food, and we only had one knife—" he breathed out. "I made sure not to freak out."

"And in not freakin' out, you made sure that nobody freaked out as well," Techno noted.

"I think so," he said. "I'm not sure."

"I think a lot of people look up to you," Ranboo said.

He snorted. "Fuckin' *who*?"

"I do," Purpled said. Tommy's jaw dropped as the magenta-eyed Human turned around the look at them, his eyes displaying seriousness. "I really do look up to you, Tommy," he repeated. "Honestly. You're one of the strongest people I know."

"Also the fucking weakest," he muttered, blinking away spots as the Golden Gate Bridge reemerged in his mind.

Techno's hand came down on his shoulder, and Tommy looked up at the commander. "You're too hard on yourself, kid," the half-Piglin grunted, his voice slightly rasping from the tusks that protruded from his mouth. Tommy rolled his eyes at the title.

"I'm not a kid," he grumbled, despite being the youngest there.

Nobody deigned to point out the obvious, and the conversation lapsed into peaceful taciturnity as Tommy studiously analyzed their surroundings. The grass had been shaved off and replaced with concrete paths and metal plating from solar panels, and he noted the quartz and glass labs that, when peered through, had scientists scurrying around like tiny mice with microscopes and other tools.

"What are they here for?" he found himself asking. "They've clearly cured the...uh, the virus."

"Biotic plant infection," Ranboo corrected offhandedly. "They're plant pathologists that study diseases in plants caused by pathogens and environmental conditions."

Tommy snorted. "Nerd," he said.

"Ah, the *point* is," Ranboo said, rolling his eyes. "They still don't know where the plague came from. They—you know, rightly—want to make sure that it won't happen on other planets."

"It's still Chroma's fault," Purpled muttered.

Techno glanced at him sharply. "Nobody said it wasn't," the half-Piglin grunted. "But I think the galaxy—even the Arachnids—would prefer if this never happened again."

"Aren't the Arachnids...with Chroma?" Ranboo said, frowning. "They handed Tommy right over to him. Chroma. Ah."

"I doubt all Arachnids are despicable," Purpled responded. "Just like not all Humans are...well, whatever we consider *good*." Tommy frowned again. "Look, I know all your experience with the buggers has been bad. I'm not saying you shouldn't hate them. Just—the guards in Pogtopia—they were all races, not Arachnids...you know?"

He considered that. Techno tilted his head, looking curious, but clearly biting his tongue back from asking invasive questions.

Yes, that had been true. Humans and Felines and Merlings and Blazeborn and Phantoms. And, of course, Chroma himself was an Avian.

Okay, maybe Purpled was right. But he wasn't going to *admit* that. That would ruin his already piss-poor reputation!

"We're here," Purpled announced, breaking Tommy from his chain of thoughts.

"Where is...here?" Ranboo said, asking the question for both Tommy and Techno. It was clearly a white marble building with a title written in a language that Tommy couldn't read, but that probably wasn't what Ranboo wanted to know.

Purpled threw him a displeased look. "Weren't you listening?"

"No," they chorused.

"Idiots, the lot of you," the Human grumbled. "We're taking hoverbikes to Pogtopia. Duh."

"For a tour...?" Tommy asked, trailing off.

"No," Purpled scoffed. "Their tours are stupid and wrong." He stomped off into the building, motioning for the three of them to wait in the street. Technoblade shifted, taking a step as if to follow Purpled—but clearly thought better of it and stayed where he was.

Tommy raised an eyebrow at the response. "He doesn't like the Pogtopia tours?"

"It gets a little old if you have to watch a tour guide explain the abridged events, some of which are dead wrong," Ranboo said gently.

"They explain it wrong?" Tommy asked.

"Not...exactly," the Enderian said, tilting his head. "But it's not the way that Purpled and I would like it to be explained."

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"Thanks," Tommy said dryly.

"What Ranboo is *tryin'* to say is that historians are direct and sometimes insensible," Techno spoke up. "Especially to survivors. They say things that—you know, could possibly be true—but that people like you, rightfully so, hate hearin'."

"I went on a quarter of a tour with Purpled," Ranboo spoke up. "They have our pictures in the mausoleum above the three sun-struck tombs of the other members of the Children's Rebellion."

Tommy blinked slightly, not quite sure how to comprehend that sentence. "I mean, not yours. But mine. And recently they found...uh—" Ranboo coughed. "—remember when Foolish got his hands on that one polaroid camera? Yeah, they found it. Somehow."

"I thought it got destroyed in that one mine," Tommy muttered.

"I thought so too," Ranboo admitted.

"Mine?" Techno cut in, raising an eyebrow.

"They had explosive mines surrounding the warehouses," Tommy explained, and Techno blanched slightly. "Said it was...a *safety precaution*, so psychos didn't break in and steal all the food that they were...protecting."

"Hoarding," Ranboo said, and Tommy inclined his head.

"Weren't you all children?" Techno asked.

"Yeah, Pogtopia was a school," Tommy explained. "Besides Chroma and the guards, we were all children aged like nine through eighteen."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"I didn't get it either," Tommy said, shrugging. "We tried to break into a warehouse, and Alyssa set off a mine. Grian got her away right in time—he was an Elytrian, if you didn't know—but we thought the camera was lost. With all the pictures."

"Ah, it was recovered," Ranboo repeated. "Recently, actually. Within the past month."

Tommy frowned. "Why wasn't I informed of this?" he asked, slightly annoyed.

"You were...dealing with things," Ranboo said with a slight cough.

"You're not wrong," he muttered, eye twitching. "I don't particularly enjoy seeing myself in disaster museums."

"Yeah, I didn't either," Techno grunted. Tommy looked at him. "What? There's one for the *H.M.S Fran* on Terra. Did you not know?"

"No," he said softly. "I didn't, actually."

Techno blinked at him. "Oh. When we go back, I'll have to show you sometime."

"My parents don't—" he cut himself off.

"Your family do not have graves near there, no," Techno said. "Their friends made sure of that seven years ago. But they do have dedication stones."

He swallowed. "Oh."

"Anyway," Techno said. "As a survivor of the *H.M.S Fran* —and being half-Feline—I did have to give a small utterance of what transpired." He shifted slightly. "It wasn't the greatest thing that I had to do. I was around your age, actually."

"I'm sorry," Tommy said. "About that."

"It's not your fault," Techno shook his head. "I would have spent my entire life on the Nether if that hadn't happened. I would never have met Phil or Skeppy or Wil or Dream or...you."

"The *H.M.S Fran* was heading towards the Nether?" Tommy said. "I mean, I know some Piglin refugees are there now, but they're also on the Bastion-class space stations, right?"

"That's correct," Techno answered. "Ranboo, what was that you were saying about the tour?"

"Huh?" the Enderian said, blinking his multichromatic eyes. "Oh. Yeah, ah, they used the pictures found in the polaroids to construct forward-facing images of the rest of the members of the Children's Rebellion. This is all very recent, of course—hasn't even been published in the data yet." Ranboo hesitated once more. "Including you, Tommy."

Despite the current conversation, he felt a grin tug its way across his face. "Did they at least make me look poggers?"

Ranboo sighed. "I don't know. I haven't seen it yet."

"I always look poggers," Tommy proclaimed.

"Then why are you asking?" Techno asked him.

"I don't know what this conversation is about, and I don't care," Purpled said loudly as he exited the marble building clutching two small rectangular boxes—keys, actually, now that Tommy took a closer look at them. "I got the goods."

He raised an eyebrow. "Drugs?"

"What—no," Purpled scoffed, tossing one of the rectangular electronics to Technoblade, who caught it deftly with his thick-skinned hand. "Hoverbike chips."

"There's only two of them," he pointed out. "And four of us."

"Yeah, no fucking shit, Sherlock," Purpled said. Tommy frowned, not entirely understanding that reference, but from how Technoblade snorted, clearly, it was something he should have, had he grown up in a better place. "They're two-seaters."

He brightened. "Can I—"

"No," Ranboo, Purpled, and Techno said in unison.

He felt his face fall into a pout. "Why not?"

"First of all, you don't have your piloting license," Technoblade pointed out.

"And you do?" he retorted.

"I have my galactic driving license," the half-Piglin responded smoothly, and Tommy scowled. "That means that I can control any ground-bound vehicle."

"I don't even have *a* driver's license," he said.

"It's surprising that you're trying to get a piloting license," Ranboo muttered. "Can't even drive a hovercar."

"Hey!" Tommy protested. "I finished the mandatory beginning lessons! Now all I need is a piloting mentor."

"Which can't be Dream, yeah, we get it," Purpled said.

"Unfortunately," he scowled. "And they've got to offer." He'd gone to lessons with Lani and Drista for weeks now—lessons they should have taken at school, but Philza had withdrawn them from. He'd scrounged together enough energy to put together a ship engine with Finn, done a bit of internal hardware coding with Harvey, and even baked a cake with Bad! And it had been edible, too!

And yet, he still couldn't get his beginner's permit until he had a mentor to teach him. Being a pilot sucked. He should have become a captain instead.

"I'm going to, ah, drive the other one," Ranboo said, sort of apologetically, as he caught the other key—chip, whatever—that Purpled tossed. "I actually do have a driver's license."

"I never had time," he snapped, and then winced. "Sorry. Didn't mean it like that. This place makes me jumpy." Tommy glanced around at the sparse science officers that scurried around like little rats forever entombed in a cage they would never escape from.

"I get it," Purpled said, for once, sympathetic. "But I'll ride with Ranboo, and you'll go with Techno, and *no*, you won't be driving."

"It'd be funny, though," he muttered.

"Yeah," Techno said. "Until I haul you back to Nihachu and Philza with a terrible explanation on why, *once again*, you got injured. Under my jurisdiction. That's one approach to doing latrine sanitation for a month." The half-Piglin gave a faux shudder. "No, thank *you*."

"Why would I get injured?" he asked, annoyed.

"You'd crash," Ranboo said.

"No, I wouldn't."

"We *all* crash our first time on hoverbikes," Techno said with a shake of his pink hair as he snorted. Tommy rolled his eyes. "It's like one of the general rules. To tell you the truth, I'm *unmistakably* not desirin' to explain to our Chief Medical Officer why you weren't operatin' a hoverbike in a considerably more controlled environment than Pogtopia."

"I broke my arm," Ranboo offered.

"Chipped a tusk," Techno immediately stated, grinning widely. "It's gone now, 'course."

"I got a concussion," Purpled said flippantly. "With your luck, you'll end up killing yourself." He gave Tommy a frank look. "Slowly. Painfully."

He rolled his eyes. "You have no faith in me."

"You're right," Purpled said, his voice clipped. "I don't."

Tommy muttered something particularly unchildlike under his breath as he got off the hoverbike, wincing as he rubbed the inside of his shins. "Fucking hells," he grumbled, wondering if his skin was blistering underneath his civilian attire.

"You haven't built up the necessary calluses yet," Techno grumbled, his hand coming up and stopping Tommy from faceplanting in the tall grass.

"Meh meh meh meh, my name is Technoblade, and I am a bitch," he said, pushing away from the half-Piglin, who raised an eyebrow at him as he stumbled and nearly fell again. "That's what you sound like, prick."

"I don't speak child," Techno said.

Ranboo stepped in between the two swiftly as Tommy made to charge at the unstirred commander. "We're at Pogtopia," the Enderian said.

Tommy halted instantly and turned towards Purpled, who had dismounted and was staring inelegantly towards the broken-down town. Cautiously, Tommy followed his gaze towards the town he had only seen through memories and a brief hovertrain ride past.

It did the place no justice.

It wasn't beautiful, per se. In fact, it was really quite ugly. It was no grand city, and with whatever Chroma had been trying to do—Tommy liked to pretend he hadn't guessed it—he hadn't raised nearly enough funds to build a town that would last centuries. The historians had kept it in its current state, and Tommy stilled at the large angry orange letterings that decorated the sides of some buildings.

Fight back.

Retaliate.

Things Alyssa had put her heart into with flashing eyes and pointed teeth and peach-labeled spraypaint cans.

They will not win.

They cannot win.

The last one fades off into a bit of a scrawl, because they'd been caught by guards and had had to run. Ranboo had teleported Alyssa out the first times she'd written her words—not far, the Enderian had never been able to travel very far, but teleporting itself was rare for his people. And Tommy had known his job was to lose the guards in the grasses before returning to the cave. It had been in one of the clarity moments Ranboo had had.

He'd never told Ranboo that he'd left the cave to help. He didn't know how.

"Which one is it?" Purpled asked him as Tommy stepped up to his shoulder. Magenta eyes met his as Purpled waved his hand towards Pogtopia. Now that Tommy had seen San Francisco, Pogtopia seemed tiny.

In hindsight, it *was* tiny.

Horrible things happened in small places.

"What?" he said eventually.

"Which one is it?" Purpled repeated. "Which one killed them?"

Tommy flinched slowly, his eyes flickering between the orange pain littering the buildings. Some sayings were more prominent than others. Some were longer. It didn't matter.

"I don't know," he whispered—and then laughed. Technoblade shifted behind him, evident by the soft crunching of golden grass. Purpled merely blinked at him. "I don't fucking remember; that's the funny bit. I have no fucking idea which quote Alyssa was writing when the three of them were captured and then executed." He laughed again, but it was joyless and dreary and made a nearby animal take flight. "All these years, and I don't know what she was writing when she fell, because I wasn't even there."

Can I say hi to my dead friends, please?

Chapter Notes

There's a tag limit on Ao3 now, so I had to delete 27 of my tags.

This sucks.

*"How terrible it is, to love
someone that Death can touch."*

- Vexicus

Unfortunately, the mausoleum wasn't made of cold marble that quite matched Tommy's horrible mood—well, it was made of marble, but it wasn't cold. Not at all. Not in the slightest. There was a bit of...well, it was something akin to carpeting on the inside and wooden beams with skylights in every other panel. Red sunlight poured through every clear surface, making the hall dance with something akin to fire. When Tommy had been younger, he had been unsettled by the color of the sky and the light the sun shed upon the ground. He hadn't been here in a while, but it no longer unsettled him.

There were also warm pictures filled the halls to the very end, with glass-paned windows between them. "Who made the artworks?" he found himself asking as he entered the halls, glad that his shoes did not echo emptily upon the flooring.

"Artists," Purpled replied. "Friends of the lost children. Parents of the lost children. Brothers, sisters..." he gestured widely. "Those that felt for the loss of the preventable."

Tommy blinked at the painting. It was relatively unadorned yet meant so much to him at the same time. A red sky, a setting—rising?—sun of orange, and a golden field blanketing the foreground. It was a simple canvas with simple brushstrokes, yet here it was, making Tommy's heart hurt all the same.

How many times had he watched the sunsets with four people by his side? How many times had the sun rose and set since the fifth person joined their group, making the quintet a hexad? How many times had he seen the sun of the Red Planet rise and fall as blood painted the skies as readily as it had the streets?

"What does this say?" he asked, pointing at the small inscription by the base of the painting, written in another language.

"That's Enderian," Techno said behind him, and he jumped slightly.

"Ah, yes," Ranboo said, coughing slightly. "It's the artist's name. Uh— $\text{!j}\text{J}\text{—}\text{!}\text{J}\text{!}\text{L}\text{.}$."

"Of course," he said soberly, only partially understanding some of the syllables that had poured out of Ranboo's mouth. He didn't bother to ask for a translation—there was rarely one anyway, and sometimes others would change their names to syllables or nicknames to fit Standard. Tommy couldn't actually pronounce Ranboo's Enderian name.

He moved on to the next painting, which was a watercolor rendition of Pogtopia. In flames. The orange lettering of various rebellious sayings on the wall almost blended perfectly with the painted fire. Almost. Tommy could just barely make them out.

There was a solemn silence as the four of them made their way down the mausoleum hall. Tommy, at this point, wasn't quite sure if it was a mausoleum—it probably wasn't—but for lack of a better word and not really wanting to ask, he decided to call it such mentally. He would stop every few paces and tilt his head at the nearest painting, because all of them were unique and different...and somehow utterly fitting.

"I helped pick them out from the mix," Purpled explained, as Tommy stared at a starry-skied mess of paint with children lying on a blanket, pointing at the constellations. He couldn't make out any of their faces, but one of them had wings. "It uh—it was the least I could do."

Eventually, they reached the end of the mausoleum—memorial? Monument?— and Tommy blinked rapidly at what had appeared to be a giant block of grey stone.

What *had* been.

Now that he was closer, he could see tiny inscribed names in the large grey stone. No, it wasn't just a stone. It was a commemorative stone, and Tommy reached up and tentatively traced one of the names of a child that had died on Pogtopia so many months ago.

K'ah'oujt.

Clearly, Elytrian, if the number of apostrophes and split constants did it any justice. Tommy wondered if they had had family still alive that had sent them to the school and had learned of the mass genocide through a single piece of media that had rankled the core of the Galactic Rebellion.

His hand moved over to another random name he still did not recognize.

Ė'nnâbr'ây.

That one was Piglish. Maybe. He wasn't entirely certain, but it was a mouthful, that was for damn sure. Tommy regretted not getting to know more kids, though his reasoning for introvertedness at the time had been sound. Purpled and Ranboo hovered, silent at his shoulders, as they two scanned the great list of names.

Three thousand, two hundred, and seventy names, to be exact.

"Three thousand, two hundred, and seventy-*one*," Purpled corrected absently. Oops. He must've spoken out loud.

Wait—

"What?" he asked, turning to look at the magenta-eyed boy, whose eyes were full of sadness as he stared at the list of names that Chroma had yet to take responsibility for. "There were three thousand, two hundred, and seventy-three of us."

"Yes," Purpled said, and then he jabbed harshly at the stone. "There. Look."

Tommy looked. And there—

Tomathy David.

He drew in a breath harshly. That was his name—his *fake* name, clear as daylight. "They—"

"You were dead," Purpled said cryptically, cutting clean through Tommy's words. "You. Were. Dead. I scoured the stone for hours, looking for your name. They're in order, you know." His hand shifted once, sharply.

ਮੈਲਿਸਾ ਮੈਡੋਜ਼ .

Then, in parenthesis—

Alyssa Meadows.

Her Standard name.

"Alyssa," he whispered, her blinding smile coming to mind.

"The graves are the same layout as the stone," Purpled said. His finger moved down a name.

Gry'an E'xspl'cua.

(Grian Xelqua).

Before Tommy even had time to breathe, Purpled moved one last time, left, to the left of Grian's name and below Tommy's.

פאָקסיע אַלעקסאנדער.

(*Focio Alexander*).

And to Tommy and Purpled and Ranboo, the last remaining members of the children of Pogtopia—

Foolish.

"Did they find the bodies?" he asked.

Purpled studied him slowly, his hand returning to its place by his sides. "Yes," he said, eventually. "It wasn't pretty, either." He squeezed his eyes shut, looking as if he were about to say more, but nothing came out.

"They were strung up," was all Techno said when Purpled remained dead silent.

"Like *puppets*," Purpled seethed quietly, shaking his head. "As if this were nothing but a game to them. An *example*, the papers said. As if making an example of teenagers was anything except radically absurd."

"It was terrible," Techno stated, and Tommy noted the pause that came in between the middle and last word.

"I don't—" Ranboo started. "Ah, I don't remember that."

"I didn't even know that," Tommy said softly. "I ran when things got nasty."

"And that's *fine*," Purpled stressed before Tommy could go off on a tangent of self-hate. "The crew of the *L'manburg* found it."

"And promptly called a proper team of crime scene investigators," Techno said. "And the rest of 'em that was needed for such a severe...happenstance. Notified Command an' all that."

Tommy knew that the half-Piglin didn't mean to sound so calm about it, but Ranboo reached over and pushed Techno's shoulder lightly anyway.

"Anyway," Purpled said with a slight cough. "They never found yours, which—you know, since you're still alive—makes sense."

Tommy snorted. "Even if I *had* died, they wouldn't have anyway," he pointed out. "I would have been in space."

"That's heartening," Purpled grumbled. "Come on. Let's go see them."

Tommy dutifully followed him as Purpled pivoted and made his way back towards the entrance, stepping slowly around a group of Feline and Kitsune—students? Visitors?—who were softly making their way into the memorial hall. Ranboo and Technoblade trickled after them last of all, and Tommy glanced at the paintings on the other side, refusing to look at the group.

Ranboo was the one recognized—unfortunate for him, fortunate for Tommy—and one of the Kitsune students, a male with purple hair and a purple and indigo tail, stepped in front of the Enderian smoothly. Tommy turned to see Ranboo looking confused at the unwanted attention. Ahead of him, Purpled stopped and turned, curious as well.

"Excuse me?" the boy said. He couldn't have been more than twenty, though he was shorter than Ranboo and Techno. "You—you're Ranboo, right?"

"Huh?" Ranboo said stupidly, blinking his red and green heterochromatic eyes. He ran a hand through his two-toned hair, looking nervous at the inspection.

"You're a survivor of the Children's Rebellion!" a female Feline gushed, interrupting the quietness. Their guide, an aged Human male, looked slightly intrigued as well.

"Ranboo, right?" another said.

"Uh..." Ranboo said, stuttering nervously. He glanced around, looking for a way out.

Before Tommy even made more than a step in Ranboo's direction, Techno was there, glowering in his usual fashion.

"Let's...not," the half-Piglin said in his rumble voice.

"Who are you?" the Feline demanded, her voice sharper, completely changed from the cooing she'd been directing at Ranboo moments prior.

"I'm me," Technoblade said, and he slapped his right thigh sharply. Tommy, just like everybody else in the hall, glanced down at the noise. Despite the civilian wear that they'd chosen to wear—Tommy, in a red pullover and jeans, and Purpled, in his classic purple sweatshirt, Techno had gone slightly overboard with high-rise black pants and some sort of regency shirt.

Of course, it was Technoblade. Technoblade had long pink hair that was currently down save for a tiny braid down the left side of his face that had a small heart band at the end, complete with darker hashes in the middle of the heart. Tommy wasn't going to pretend he didn't know the meaning of *that* symbol.

Oh, yeah. And the holster on the side of his leg made of black leather that held a phaser keyed to Techno's fingertips. Had he mentioned that?

No, he hadn't.

The girl paled slightly and stepped back, her ears flattening down onto her hairline. Technoblade grinned, but it wasn't a pretty grin, showing most of his teeth—particularly the bases of the tusks that protruded from his mouth. Tommy felt some ounce of pride as he made his way over to a half-panicked Ranboo and grabbed his elbow.

"Come on," he murmured, aware of Purpled's hovering dozens of feet away. "Let's get out of here."

"And—and who are you?" the rude girl demanded as Tommy guided Ranboo towards Purpled and, subsequently, the entrance. To her credit, her voice only faltered slightly. At his back, Tommy could feel Techno bare his teeth slightly more—which was only *slightly* animalistic, but both parties knew that by Techno playing into his more Piglin traits, he garnered more fear.

Tommy paused slightly.

"A friend," he said. "That's all that matters, ey?"

And when Ranboo grinned, it was full of gratitude.

He rested a hand on white—limestone, maybe—and traced the Standard letterings that made up the stardates and name of his friend. Beside him, in the grass, Ranboo sat cross-legged playing with two strands, glancing up every now and then and blinking away his Enderian tears. Purpled's mouth was a thin line, and he would use his hoodie sleeve to wipe away his watery eyes. And occasionally snort something under his breath.

"I'm sorry, Alyssa," he whispered, tracing her Feline name. "I'm—I'm sorry, ऐलिसा मैडोन्ज़." His lip was trembling as he stumbled—note: badly butchered—her native name, and Tommy bit down on it until he tasted blood. Technoblade, dozens and dozens of meters away, peered down at a gravestone and wiped some nonexistent dust off the rim.

"What are you sorry for?" Purpled asked him.

He shrugged. "Nothing," he said. Ranboo frowned at him. "*Doing* nothing," he corrected hurriedly. "I dunno. Standing there. Letting her spray her stupid paint across the buildings." He gestured behind them, past the field of graves and towards the remains of Pogtopia.

"Was it stupid?" Purpled asked him.

"No," he said stubbornly. "I don't know. I don't think I know a lot anymore."

"That's just life," Ranboo pointed out, speaking up for the first time in minutes. "Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next." He shifted uncomfortably under the gazes of the two other boys. "What?"

"I didn't take you for an inspirational speaker," Purpled said dryly. "That was always Grian." Tommy stood up, hands in his pockets, and walked to the grave behind him—closer to Pogtopia, and in a grid sense, below Alyssa's stone.

"Gry'an E'xspl'cua," he read, the words stolen from him and drifting to join the grass in between the thousands of near-identical naming stones that lay beyond Pogtopia, well-kept. Some of them had flowers. Ranboo and Purpled both sat up and joined him as he stared down at the limestone gravestone. "Grian Xelqua," he said again, this time enunciating his Standard accent.

"Member of the Children's Rebellion," Purpled spoke up next, reading the following wording below the Elytrian's name. He stated the stardates next—Grian had been the oldest, but his ending stardate remained the same as Alyssa, Foolish, and Tommy's false grave.

"And the universe said the light you seek is within you," Ranboo said.

Tommy stiffened slightly, turning his head towards the Enderian, who wilted slightly.

"I—I do remember some things," Ranboo admitted quietly. "Ah, I mean, not to mention it says that right there." He pointed with slightly clawed fingers at the bottom of the grave—and there, hidden by the golden grass, were the words '*and the universe said the light you seek is within you*'.

Tommy stepped around Grian's grave and returned to Alyssa's, squatting and brushing aside golden strands to get a better look. "And the universe said you are the daylight," he said quietly.

"It was my idea," Purpled admitted as Tommy stood up again and stalked over to Foolish's grave, sadness tinkling through him as he lay a hand on the headstone of his old friend. "I thought—you know. We wrote it together—might as well end it together."

"Right," he said softly, thinking of those restless nights staring up at the stars when everything had been peaceful. Kneeling down by the dead Phantom's grave hurt—not because he was injured, but because he knew that, somewhere, deep below—or perhaps not even here, but *somewhere*—the bones of his friends lay degrading in empty boxes.

He didn't want that, he realized. He wanted what Sniff had had. He wanted to be part of everything and nothing when he died. He didn't want a cold coffin in the ground, never seeing the light of day again. An empty grave was fine, if there were still people to cry over his headstone.

"And the universe said everything you need is within you," Ranboo said, when Tommy blinked away the tears and realized he had been staring at the words for a good minute and a half. "That's what Foolish's favorite line was, right?"

"Right," he echoed when Ranboo's panicked questioning voice grew too much. "That's it, innit?"

"Hm?" Purpled asked.

He stood up and looked up at the scarlet sky and laughed slightly, tears beginning to slice their way down his face. "This. This is it for them."

"I mean—" Ranboo started, cutting himself off. "Um, I suppose so."

He shook his head, his blonde hair, partially undone from his braid—God, Techno was going to kill him—covering his forehead and part of his eyesight. "All that fighting," he whispered. "All that conflict. All those powerful speeches, all those words—all that hand-to-hand training—all those dreams of what came after—for nothing?"

"Not for nothing," Purpled said instantly. "Nothing's ever for nothing, Tommy." Tommy gave him a skeptical look. "I mean—yeah, Grian will never be a navigator—but let's face it, the six of us weren't ever gonna be part of a crew together, 'cause we'd need a captain, and none of us were ever *fit* for that type of job." Tommy shrugged, because, yeah, that was true. "And—and Alyssa will

never be a diplomat, and she never got to travel to other worlds, Tommy—and Foolish never got to become a science officer." Purpled fell silent for a moment, the four of them facing the graves of their friends from an event that seemed to have happened forever ago and just yesterday all at once. "And, yeah. They never got to follow their dreams, and we *sort* of did, but you know what? That was stolen from them, Tommy. It wasn't your fault or my fault or Ranboo's fault; it was *Chroma's*."

"If only I had—" he started.

"No," Purpled said. "You may have been the leader of the Children's Rebellion, Tommy Innes, but you blame yourself far too much. I love you to death, but you *have* to stop blaming yourself. It's quite selfish, really."

"Huh?" he said stupidly.

"Survivor's guilt," Purpled said. "That's what Eret told me. We all have it. Survivor's guilt—it, ah means that—" he cut himself off. "I'm not the medical officer here. Ranboo?"

"It occurs when a person believes they have done something wrong by surviving a traumatic or tragic event when others did not, often feeling self-guilt," Ranboo said.

"That's a lot of guilt to spread among three people," Tommy said.

"It would be, if you would stop *stealing my portion*," Purpled said. "And Ranboo's portion, near-invisible or not. Holy shit, man. You blame yourself for every wrong move that ever happened, and—and you leave no self-hatred for the rest of us. You're constantly telling us how it's not our fault, and then you turn around and pour so much self-resentment down your throat that I'm surprised you're not drowning."

"Maybe I am," he said softly.

Purpled paused for a moment, magenta eyes considering him. Tommy was the first to look away. "Maybe you are," he said finally. "But that's the point, isn't it? Foolish once made an analogy to a storm. He said that only together can we stand tall among the wind and the lightning because we support each other."

"Bit difficult, innit?" he snorted. "Now that three of the supports are gone."

"Perhaps," Purpled allowed. "But that doesn't mean you stand *alone*, Tommy." He had to reach up a bit to put a hand on Tommy's shoulder—Purpled hadn't always been the shortest in the group; that title had once belonged to Grian and Alyssa, who had stood at around a hundred and sixty-seven standardized systems—but with Ranboo at around two hundred standardized systems and Tommy at one hundred and eighty-one, the Human was the shortest left.

"And the universe said you are not alone," he whispered under his breath, glancing towards his false gravestone, knowing that since Alyssa and Grian and Foolish all had their favorite lines from their poem written at the bases—he probably did too.

"And the universe said you are stronger than you know," Purpled echoed after him, a bit late.

"And the universe said I love you because you are love," Ranboo finished. Despite the missing sentences from people passed—never mind that Purpled's line came before Tommy's—Ranboo always finished last.

"The end," the three of them chorused in unison.

"Some things never change," Purpled said, smiling slightly. "Some things do." He jerked his head towards the graves of their friends, and Tommy felt sadness creep through him like an oncoming rainstorm. "But don't blame yourself. Blame Chroma."

"Sometimes, I think you should have been the leader," Tommy said, only half-joking.

"I think I might have been," Purpled said seriously. "If I hadn't been sick."

And—yeah, okay, he was right. Purpled had always been the older one and the most morally grey—willing to do anything and everything to save his friends, even if it went against everything that everyone stood against.

"Leadership is a hard position, Tommy," Purpled said. "You did what you did, and you saved Ran and me. That's what's important right now. You didn't fail."

"Mostly," he muttered, picking at his nails irritably. "*Mostly*."

Purpled rolled his eyes and collapsed into the grass, staring up at the sky, one hand thrown over his forehead. Tommy, far more collected, lay down next to him, and Ranboo made a noise of displeasure but followed the whims of his friends. "Look," the Human said finally. "I seriously don't know how to help you. I'm not a therapist. Bad is. I already know he's helping you with—uh, you know—" Tommy rolled his eyes defensively, huffing. It wasn't that Purpled didn't want to say it; he was just afraid of somehow triggering Tommy.

As if there were any cliffs around here.

Wow, that was a terrible first thought.

"—and I'm sort of a shitty friend—"

"You are *not* a shitty friend," he snorted, rolling his eyes.

"Tommy, I literally forced you into having a panic attack so you would admit that you had issues."

"Yeah, well, I was in denial," he said. "I did have issues."

"You're *out* of that stage?"

"...maybe. No. Bad says I'm not at acceptance yet."

"That's what I thought."

Tommy sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Purpled, you have questionable morals."

"At best," Ranboo introjected. Purpled reached over Tommy and punched Ranboo in his stomach. The Enderian yelped, frowning at the Human.

"Fine, at *best*," Tommy said. "But you're still my friend."

"Okay, that's true," Purpled muttered. "Hopefully."

Tommy elbowed him hard. "Shut up," he said. "You are my friends. And I suppose that means, by extension, the *L'manburg* is my home."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Purpled smile. "Remember when I said that you always had a home with my brothers and me?" he said. "Guess I was right."

"I thought you meant like an apartment, dickhead," he snorted. "Not a fucking spaceship."

Purpled was silent for a moment. "It is home, isn't it?" he said amicably, not quite asking Tommy directly—more of a pointed statement or an observation.

Tommy bit his lip. "Yeah," he said quietly. "I guess it makes sense that since my first home was a flagship-class spaceship, my third one should be as well."

"Third one?" Purpled said gently.

"The Wasteland?" Ranboo said immediately, surprised. "I didn't know you considered that place...ah, a home."

"I don't," he said with a small laugh. "And I never did. I mean, experimentation, constant bullying...meeting Wilbur..." Purpled snorted. "...no, that place was more of a temporary residence than a home."

"Isn't that the definition of a house?" Ranboo said, turning his head to look at Tommy.

"Living somewhere does not make it a *home*," he stressed. "It's—it's somewhere you spend time, yes. But it's not a home. Home is a word too wildly thrown around. Home isn't a place that can be defined—it can only be felt. And unfortunately for my traitorous heart, I used to call Pogtopia a home—not because I loved it, but because my family was there."

"Right," Ranboo said. "Um—I mean, yeah, sort of. I don't—ah, I don't remember all of it." He shifted slightly. "But—ah. Yeah. That would make sense."

"I don't think I ever did think of it as home," Purpled said apologetically. "But I did love you guys. And maybe that's because I knew I had a home back in San Francisco where Punz and Ponk were going through their final lessons—maybe because I was missing my brothers so much, I was never lost."

"Floundering," Tommy corrected absently. "Like drowning. Reaching for air—Chroma gave it to me. I mean, yeah, he may have manipulated me—"

"*Did*," Purpled said lightly. "He *did* manipulate you. Us. But—you. Because you're an Avian."

"Right," he said, with a small swallow, stripping himself of his guarding shields for a second and reaching for the bundle of light in the back of his mind that made up Rae. The bridge was far too tiring for him to ever exchange emotions with her, but he was able to raise a hand to the universe and point in her direction. Purpled and Ranboo both looked at him, confused, and Tommy didn't deign to answer as he put his hand by his side. Avian bonds were special. Lani and Drista had been all but sworn to secrecy. Nobody had to know. "Yeah. He—he said he'd give me a home. And he did. For a while."

"And then..." Ranboo sucked in a breath sharply. "Ah. Yes."

"It went to shit," Tommy said, a slight sneer tugging at the corners of his lips. "But I still love you guys."

"We have a love-hate relationship," Purpled corrected. "You guys love me, and I hate all of you."

"Oh, shut up," Ranboo grumbled, once again reaching over and hitting Purpled in his gut. The Human groaned, only half-joking.

"What am I, a divider?" Tommy complained.



[rt_nique](#)

My name is Tommy Innes, and I was the leader of the Children's Rebellion.

Chapter Notes

Karma is beautiful and two of my friends are now dating. - Juliet

"iT's a fAkE rElATiOnShIp"

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"The scariest moment is always just before you start."

- Unknown

"Well," the receptionist said as she looked over her glasses at the three boys standing in front of her desk. Barring Technoblade. Whom Purpled had kicked out to go to a bar, or whatever off-duty overworking half-Feline half-Piglins did on breaks. If they had breaks. "I wasn't expecting three of you."

"Well, I listed the interview to have three boys of staggering heights with our exact descriptions," Purpled said haughtily. "Right down there with Ranboo's Enderian albinism and Tommy's idiotic smirk."

He wiped the smirk off his face. Purpled glanced at him pointedly.

"But, sir, this is an interview for the *Children's Rebellion*," the woman said, eyes wide. "That's only two."

"Was," Purpled corrected. "Besides, you're not in any sort of position to contradict me. I'm half-debating leaving here and calling in and telling the newscast that *you* made me cancel our first-ever interview. Imagine that. I don't think your bosses would be thrilled with you."

The Human woman gulped. "Oh—no, thank you, sir."

"That's what I thought."

"I'll uh—I'll alert the interviewer."

Tommy watched as she hurried away through the side door. "That wasn't very nice," he chastized Purpled. "She's sort of right."

Purpled snorted. "It's not her job to question it," he said. "She's not a very good receptionist."

Tommy squinted at the building. "I can't imagine they get many services," he said.

"Yeah, they flew out here," Purpled said. "Set up shop and all that."

Ranboo frowned. "For *us*?"

"I mean, hey, they want an interview, they gotta come to us," the Human snorted.

"You're a menace," Tommy announced.

"You're just *now* realizing that?" Purpled retorted. "I've been a menace for years and years."

"I should have known that when I first met you," he muttered.

"You *did* know that. I'm just such a cool person that I allowed us to become friends anyhow."

"Did you just use the word *anyhow*?" he demanded.

"Yes," Purpled said. "Because I'm cool."

"You two are more alike than you know," Ranboo muttered.

"Shut up, Boob boy," Tommy said.

Purpled opened his mouth to retort something as well, eyes glittering with humor when a cough shut up all three boys and made them turn towards the door that the receptionist had disappeared into. Tommy heard rather than saw Ranboo do a double-take as all of them looked towards the tall Enderian male that had cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation," the Enderian said politely. "Our cameramen are setting up the cameras as we speak. We just got done filming a documentary on the Pandoravirus."

"Biotic plant infection," Ranboo muttered under his breath.

"The...Pandoravirus?" Tommy asked slowly.

"That's the coined name of the *biotic plant infection* that made the plants and animals die," Purpled explained, throwing a look at Ranboo, who seemed happier that they'd used his term.

"Yes, of course," the Enderian—interviewer?—said. "I'd forgotten that people that don't watch the reports habitually wouldn't know that." Purpled inclined his head slightly. "My name is L·l·|·:Jṽ—" Tommy started slightly at the influx of harsh, slightly screechy syllables that left the Enderian's mouth. "—but you can call me Elijah."

"Wow," Purpled said. "That sounds *exactly* like what you just...screeched—I mean said."

"It's a near enough translation," Ranboo replied. "I'm Ranboo." He blinked. "Or, you know, ʘ_ʘ." ʘ_ʘ.

"I don't think I have the vocal cords to repeat that," Tommy muttered.

"Probably not," Ranboo said eloquently. "Purpled had to get several tubes down his throat on multiple occasions on account of permanently injuring his vocal cords when trying to repeat what I was saying. Over and over."

"==İ· ||J==," Purpled said.

Elijah looked at him in surprise. "You have a fairly good accent," he said.

"Wow, I could tell," Tommy said sarcastically. "I'm Tommy, by the way," he added, almost as an afterthought.

"Uh, no offense..." Elijah trailed off. "Who are you?"

"Tommy," he repeated.

"That's not quite what he meant," Ranboo told Tommy, who scoffed.

"Tommy's a very good friend," Purpled said, surprising both boys, who fell silent at the rare consideration that exited from the Human's mouth. "He's also. You know. The leader of the Children's Rebellion."

Tommy groaned as Elijah's mouth dropped. "Nice going, Purpled."

Purpled肘ed him in the gut. It didn't hurt much. "What was I supposed to say? This is an interview for the *survivors* of the *Children's Rebellion*. And you're a survivor."

"He is?" Elijah said, sort of weakly.

"Yeah," Purpled said. "Elijah, meet Tomathy David."

Tommy glared as Purpled snorted at the name. "I prefer my real name," he said indignantly. "Tommy Innes, thank you *very* much."

"You mean...like the son of Sam Innes?" Elijah asked quietly. "You're the same person?"

"My life is very interesting," he deadpanned.

"Interesting is certainly a word for it," Ranboo said.

"Are you really?" Elijah asked him.

"Yes," Tommy said.

"I've read about you in news articles," the older Enderian said, sounding slightly interested. "I had no idea you were on F970-RB when the Red Planet's Genocide took place."

He rolled his eyes. "I didn't tell the news shit," he said. "They assumed a lot of fucking things, most of which aren't true." Purpled nudged him slightly, and Tommy sighed. "So—yeah, I was here when the um—the genocide happened."

"That'll be an enormous surprise for the media," Elijah muttered, primarily to himself, Tommy thought.

"Good thing your channel gets to reveal that," Purpled said.

"Live," Ranboo retorted. "What if I mess up? What if I make a mistake? What if I say a slur—"

"Ranboo," Purpled interrupted. "Do you say slurs regularly?"

"No," Ranboo said. "Why would I say slurs?"

"You're not going to be saying slurs, then," Purpled pointed out dutifully, rolling his eyes. "Besides, it's not like *we're* going to be the main ones talking." He shifted and jabbed at Tommy's chest. "*He* is."

"Who, *me*?" he demanded.

Purpled raised a blonde eyebrow. "Am I pointing at someone else?"

"Well, no."

"So clearly, it's you."

"Why can't you talk?" he complained.

"Because, Tommy, *you* are the self-proclaimed leader of the Children's Rebellion," Purpled said. "What am I supposed to do, grab your memories and present them for you?"

"I wish."

"I don't want to go anywhere near that empty head of yours," Purpled scoffed, wrinkling his nose in mock distaste.

"Okay, children," Ranboo said. "Let's go with the nice Enderian man and stop wasting his time."

Elijah raised an eyebrow. "It's very entertaining."

"I know," Ranboo said. "Clowns, the low of 'em."

"What about your husband?" Purpled pointed out as Tommy snickered.

"He doesn't cou—*hey*, wait a second!" Tommy snickered again, and Purpled bit his lip to keep from laughing. "We're divorced!"

"I don't even *want* to know," Elijah sighed. "Well, come on, then. The camera crew should be done." He beckoned them with a dark purple slightly-clawed hand that matched Ranboo's right hand as well, and the three of them dutifully followed the elder Enderian back through the door and down a wooden-paneled hallway that slanted slightly upwards. Every ten yards or so, two doors, one on the left and one on the right—and closed—would be passed by the group.

Tommy slowed down every so often to read the signs that were, more often than not, on the left side of the plain wooden doors.

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Finally, they reached a door that read *Main Stage*, and Elijah paused, pulled out a small metal card from his pocket, and slid it smoothly across the scanner. It unlocked with a slight click, and Tommy followed the Enderian—both Enderians, actually, *fuck* their height—onto a very news-like stage. He took a slight glance at the two other people in the room—a woman and a man; the woman a Merling with the pale tube stretching up her nose and hooking around her ear, and the man a Blazeborn, complete with the firelike eyes and maroon hair. The woman was operating a camera, nodding her head ever so slightly—and wearing a black earpiece; so clearly, someone was telling her instructions. The man was near to the woman—about five feet to the left of where the camera was—and sat in front of...a typewriter? No, it had far fewer keys. His hands were at rest at the moment, and he was scrolling through a datapad, though he did glance up and watch the four of them enter the room.

"That's a stenotype machine," Purpled muttered in his ear, putting up a hand and pushing him forward towards the central part of the recording studio. Tommy stumbled slightly and turned to glare at the Human, who raised an eyebrow.

Elijah sat down behind a desk that bore a few manila folders and clasped his hands. Ranboo sat down on the couch to the left of the desk, and Tommy sat in the middle and Purpled to his right.

It was a lovely couch.

"Cy'ntyha—" He pronounced it like Cynthia, but Tommy knew better than to think it was spelled like that. The woman was a Merling, after all. "—and Mikael—" That could *not* be his real name, just like Jack's wasn't his. Although Sapnap's was far closer to the original language than Standard. "—meet Purpled and Ranboo and Tommy."

"There's three of you," Cy'ntyha said warily.

"Yes," Purpled said, slightly stiffly.

Elijah cracked a sheepish smile. "Against all odds—and kept well-hidden, I suppose—there are actually *three* survivors of the Children's Rebellion."

Mikael looked up sharply. "Really?"

"Yes," Purpled said again, answering in lieu of Tommy's silence.

Mikael stared at him shortly, and Tommy shifted under the staring. Cy'ntyha, bless her, merely shrugged and returned to quietly talking to the person in her ear. "Well, you're not Alyssa," he said, and Tommy snorted.

"Obviously. I don't have pussy ears." Purpled snorted quietly.

"...I mean, I was thinking more along the lines of you not being a girl, but that solidifies my earlier hypothesis, sure," Mikael said, his lips turning up in slight amusement. "And, I mean, obviously, you're not Grian."

"Not short enough, big man?" he asked teasingly.

"Not *winged* enough," Mikael responded, playing into the game, even though obviously he knew who Tommy was—or, instead, what name was written down. "And, obviously, Purpled and—ah, Ranboo are sitting next to you."

"So that makes me...." he prompted.

"פאָקסיאַ אלעקסאנדער," Mikael said, smoothly—as if he'd practiced that name.

Tommy snorted. "I don't even know how to say Foolish's native name," he admitted. "I mean, he was introduced as Focio Alexander. And then nicknamed to Foolish—and yeah. We never really talked about our origins."

"Tomathy David," Mikael said.

"Tommy Innes," he corrected absentmindedly. "I mean, technically, Thomas. But it's Tommy. Don't call me Thomas."

Purpled snickered. "He doesn't like it."

"It's too formal," Tommy complained. "Makes me seem old 'n shit. Like Philza Minecraft."

Elijah cleared his throat. "Well," the Enderian said. "Now that we've got introductions out of the way, there are a few forms that I'll need you three to sign before we get started." He picked up one of the folders and handed it to Ranboo—the closest—who opened it to reveal three pieces of paper. Tommy glanced up in time to see Elijah grinning and holding a pen. They made eye contact.

Elijah chuckled it at his face, and Tommy just barely managed to put a hand up and block it, distantly reminded of yellow foam balls getting blasted at his face by a particular blonde-haired Human. He stuck out his tongue childishly as Purpled plucked it out of his lap with a slight cluck of his tongue. Tommy grabbed the paper that Ranboo had proffered him—and a new pen; there were three of them—and then a clipboard that the younger Enderian passed down the line as well.

"Interview consent form," he read aloud, briefly skimming the name. He winced when he got to *Participant's Name* and crossed out Tomathy David, replacing it with Thomas Innes. And then he crossed out Thomas and went with Tommy.

"Very neat," Purpled said observationally when he peered over to look at Tommy's paper. Tommy snorted and jabbed at Purpled with the pen.

"You two are children," Ranboo muttered under his breath, and Tommy pretended he didn't hear that statement, because it was obviously untrue.

"I confirm that my participation in the interview is voluntary," he said, reading the first of eight bullet points. "Does being dragged here count—"

"Just check the box, Tommy," Purpled said with an exhausted but teasing sigh.

Tommy marked the box with a flow of the pen, glad the ink wasn't red. He didn't like red ink, he realized. It reminded him a bit too much of Human blood. "'I understand that I will not receive any payments for participating in this research interview.' Really? I like money." Mikael had to hide a cough—and pretend he wasn't paying attention as Tommy commented aloud—and Elijah was rubbing the bridge of his nose, even though there was a slight smile on his face.

"I should have let you stay in prison," Purpled grumbled. "I shouldn't have to listen to this shit."

"You love me," he teased.

"I really don't, but believe whatever you want."

Tommy rolled his eyes, smelling the lie, but returned his attention to the third bullet point. "'I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. I have the right to decline to answer any question or end the interview.' What does the first part of that even *mean*?" When nobody answered, he rolled his eyes again and neatly checked off the box. "Whatever. 'I confirm that the interview will last approximately twenty to thirty minutes.' Okay, whatever. 'I have read and understood the explanation provided to me.' No, Purpled is a bitch, and I am being kept in the dark."

"I explained it quite clearly," the magenta-eyed Human said exasperatingly. "We're giving a firsthand—and only, hopefully—report on what happened on Pogtopia three years ago."

Tommy rolled his eyes for the third time.

"If you keep doing that, it'll get stuck."

"You sound like Niki," Ranboo said.

"Don't remind me of that menace," he grumbled, bending down over the form again. Purpled snickered. "'I have been given a copy of the consent form.'" He glanced up and saw Elijah holding another of the manilla folders. "Oh. Yeah, okay. 'I wish to review the notes, transcripts, or other data collected during the interview.'"

"Mikael will give you the transcript after the interview has been conducted, if you desire," Elijah said patiently. "Remember, this is taking place on live television."

"You can type that fast?" Ranboo asked.

"Stenotype," the Merling said, which really didn't help. "Super fast keyboard. "Three hundred words per minute or higher."

"That's five words per *second*," Purpled said, doing the math far quicker than Tommy had. Of course, Purpled had always been better at math than Tommy. "At least."

"I'm a stenographer," Mikael said, shrugging slightly. "I went to school for it a few years ago, and I've only improved since then."

"Well, look where you are now," Ranboo said dryly. "Interviewing us."

"I'm glad I am," Mikael said. "I'd rather do the subtitles and transcript for an interview like this than court cases." He shuddered slightly. "I disklike court cases. Immensely."

"Mood," Tommy muttered, thinking of that one session—courtly or otherwise—he'd had in front of the Admirals. "Okay. Uh. One last one. 'I agree that the interviewers and other sections of the broadcast station may publish documents that contain quotations by me.'" He snorted again. "You'd fucking *better*."

"Probably bleep out the swearing, though," Purpled muttered.

"But it's all part of my charm!"

"What charm?" Ranboo asked, raising an eyebrow.

Purpled raised an eyebrow. "Signature, Tommy."

Tommy stuck out his tongue and signed his name with a flourish of the blue ink. He crossed his T's and double-crossed his I's and then handed it to Ranboo, who handed it to Elijah, who placed it in a second manilla folder labeled in Enderian. "Right," Elijah said. "Cy'ntyha?" The Blazeborn woman looked up at him. "You ready?"

"All ready, Eli," she said. "Sound and audio seems good on our end. Microphones should be along shortly." Tommy raised an eyebrow as a younger Human walked into the room—around their age, maybe older, and an intern probably—with three small lapel microphones that could be pressed directly over their throats. She met Tommy's eyes briefly with brown ones, her eyes widening slightly as she blinked at the three of them on the couch.

"Ash!" Cy'ntyha snapped. "You aren't here to gawk; give them the microphones."

Ash jumped slightly, looking mollified. "Yes, ma'am," she squeaked, nearly shoving the small black electronic at Tommy's face. He took it and examined it, frowning slightly as Ash scurried out of the room, looking terrified at being yelled at. Purpled plucked it neatly out of his hand and peeled the small film of decomposable stickers off it, handing it neatly back to Tommy, who took it by the sides gingerly.

"Right over your Adam's apple," Elijah said helpfully, pointing at his own, which he'd grabbed from a drawer on his desk. Tommy frowned again and stuck it there, swallowing slightly. It felt odd—like he had something preventing him from gulping.

"Can you three say something so we can balance the audio?" Cy'ntyha said, her voice kinder. "Counting, the alphabet—"

"Hey guys, welcome to the podcast. Today we're going to be talking about different types of beans. There're baked means, mashed beans, potato beans. There are so many types of beans," Ranboo said conversationally. Tommy coughed loudly, choking down the laugh that threatened to take over his chest.

Cy'ntyha blinked slightly. "Yeah, you're fine."

"Alexa, what is the I.R.S.?" Purpled asked.

"I don't know what that means," Ranboo said.

Cy'ntyha sighed, looking like she'd aged twenty years in the past half-hour alone. "And you, Toma—Thoma—Tommy?"

Tommy ignored the fact that she'd stumbled over his name and gave a very wide grin. And then he screamed. Very, very loudly.

"HOLY FUCKING SHIT!" Purpled said and slapped a hand over Tommy's mouth. "What the fuck? Why are you being so fucking loud, man?" Elijah looked slightly amused, as did Mikael, but Cy'ntyha looked annoyed, which was fine. Tommy annoyed a lot of people.

"I'm always loud," he sniffed.

"That's great, Tommy—" Ranboo started.

"—you know, to attract the opposite sex," he said. "I'm like a butterfly. That can talk. I'm here for a good time, not for a long time—"

Purpled had slapped a hand over his face again.

"I think we're good," Cy'ntyha said as Purpled snatched his hand back, looking disgusted.

"Did you *lick* me, you fucking raccoon?"

"I'm offended," he gasped mockingly.

"They're also called trash pandas," Ranboo added helpfully.

"Shut up, boob boy."

"Let's get started, shall we?" Elijah said loudly, after Cy'ntyha had returned to her place behind the camera and both her and Mikael had flashed him a thumbs up. "You three ready?"

"Yep."

"Never been readier, big man."

"That's not a word. And yes."

Cy'ntyha tapped a few buttons on a datapad she had pulled out from her suit pocket, and looked up expectantly as the camera panned towards Elijah, effectively blocking the three kids on the couch out. Tommy blinked as he saw the numbers start to flick down from three on a small screen in the back.

The words action flashed across the screen.

"Hey folks in the air, in space, back home, this is Elijah from—"

Tommy stopped listening after a few seconds, butterflies bursting to life in his stomach. Oh, God. Oh—oh *God*, he would be giving his account of Pogtopia in literally a few seconds—why had he agreed to this? What if Chroma—

A hand squeezed his wrist, and Tommy glanced to his right to see Purpled staring at him, a small smile on his face. The Human's left hand snaked over and grasped Tommy's palm, his finger tracing letters where he could not talk.

I am here. I am with you.

One letter at a time. Quickly, swiftly—practiced because they'd done that before.

I am here. I am with you.

You are not alone.

He would be okay. This interview would not kill him. His friends were here; Technoblade was outside. There were guards in the science facility. There were scanners. This was a neutral space.

"—would you three please introduce yourselves?"

Tommy blinked again, Purpled's hand halting in its tracing as they gripped each other—stability. His other hand found its way into Ranboo's black one as he looked up and noted the camera that now encompassed the three of them and Elijah.

"I'm Ranboo," the Enderian said first, because now they were doing left to right. Or, rather, right to left, from the camera's perspective. Tommy wondered how many people were on the other side, watching. He wondered if the crew of the *L'manburg*, those who weren't exploring the space dock, were watching. He wondered if Techno had told them—probably, knowing the half-Piglin.

"Tommy," he managed, and boy, he *had* to be cutting off the blood supply of his friends—but the security helped him. Perhaps it helped them too.

"And Purpled," the Human said, lastly, flashing an unbothered smile at the camera. Those who knew them would know the pain that flashed behind his magenta eyes.

"A full introduction, hmm?" Elijah asked.

"We're the survivors of the Children's Rebellion," Purpled said.

And Tommy knew that *he* deserved to be the leader, not Tommy. He knew that Purpled would have stood where he had faltered, and Purpled would have stood where he had run.

"Now, I know what you're thinking," Elijah said, and Tommy was so glad that he had shed his laughter and hidden smirks and turned serious. "There are three of them, not two. Well—that's because they've harbored a secret for—how long, now?" He turned towards the couch expectantly.

"A few months," Ranboo said warily. "We didn't know he was alive until he popped into one of our crewmate's missions and saved his as—I mean, life."

"Right," Elijah said, nodding—as if he had known this before they'd stepped into the limelight. "Would you like to introduce yourself fully?"

Tommy looked directly at the camera and wondered, on whatever mission—if they were on a mission—the crew of the *Mira* were on, and wondered whether Rae would be proud of him. He questioned if somewhere Wilbur sat in front of a screen and watched him struggle to open his mouth. He wondered if Phil and Kristin sat in their shared quarters and watched their live interview on a datapad. He wondered, if somewhere, parents and relatives and friends of those lost on Pogtopia were tuned in—watching, wondering why he had lived when so many had died.

"My name is Tommy Innes," he said. "The son of Sam and Clara Innes; born on the *H.M.S Fran* and survivor of the explosion that killed the crew. And I was the leader of the Children's Rebellion."

"Now, what does that mean?" Elijah asked—clearly, a leading question. "The universe assumed you were dead."

"Nah," he said, with a slight scoff. "I'm too stubborn to die." Beside him, Purpled snorted. "Ah—I was, um, captured. In a war prison." He was intentionally vague—he didn't know how much he was allowed to reveal about the inner workings of the Galactic Rebellion. "I escaped with one of my current crewmates."

"Yes, yes, I remember—you three are three of six teenagers aboard the *L'manburg*." Elijah turned back to the camera. "Very famous ship—I'm sure you heard of their excursions. I believe they were the crew that received the unknown distress call originating from the Red Planet." Purple nodded, confirming that.

"Not unknown," Tommy cut in. "I sent it out."

Elijah looked genuinely surprised. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's another mystery coming to a close!" Elijah said, a touch too excitedly, in Tommy's opinion, for such a somber topic. "Now, Tommy—you are the leader of the Children's Rebellion?"

"Was," he corrected. "It doesn't exist anymore. He gestured to one of the papers that Elijah had spread across his desk, depicting the six stars. "I mean, that'll always be there. But it's not a thing anymore."

"Why not?"

"I mean, half the members are dead," he said, and Purpled elbowed him. "Also, it was a stupid thing. A dream of what could have been better. We failed."

"But three of you lived," Elijah said. "And there are still writings writ upon buildings that speak of a spark of rebellion—children versus adults, and yet you still fought."

"We didn't win," he said.

"No," Purpled echoed. "We didn't win." His fingernails dug into Tommy's palm slightly, and he winced but didn't take his hand away. "But—ah, the governor would have killed the kids anyway, I think. Ranboo and I survived 'cause we lived in a cave for weeks." He didn't look very proud of that statement. "After Tommy forced us to run, nobody else was able to run away."

Elijah looked at Tommy with interest. "You forced them to run?"

He swallowed. "Yeah. I—um, the governer—Chroma—had taken a special interest in me. I was gonna be his—um, prodigy or some shit. I saw the list of people they were gonna kill. And—half of my friends were on it, so I sorta..."

"He lied to us and made us all run," Purpled cut in. "And—I mean, it worked. We starved, but so did everyone." He smiled, but it wasn't a good smile. He laughed, but it was a terrible laugh.

"You've seen the videos," Tommy said quietly. "They kept the provisions in warehouses that only the guards could enter. Ranboo got sick 'cause he didn't have the proper food that he needed to stay sane—" Ranboo glanced to the side, clearly ashamed, but Tommy pressed on. "—and Purpled came down with a Human sickness as well; pneumonia or some shit. I dunno. Bit difficult to figure out now. Who cares. But the rest of us—in the village, we were starving. I mean, we were kids. At the oldest, we were barely eighteen—and at the youngest, nine years old." Tommy shrugged. "What can kids do against weapons that can kill them in one shot? What are kids compared to adults?"

"Nothing," Purpled whispered under his breath, so quiet that the mic didn't pick it up.

"Attacking the warehouses wasn't quite my idea," Tommy said. "A few weeks in, most of the kids had heard of a smaller, outside group that had run away and started some sort of rebellion."

"And you named it the Children's Rebellion?" Elijah asked him.

"No," he snorted. "It never had a name. We were never poetic like that—I mean, Alyssa, maybe. But—no, we never named it. The name came after everyone was gone and separated, and the planet was crawling with historians. They tend to twist stories, see. So—no, it never had a name. It was just—" He waved a hand at Purpled and Ranboo. "—them. And me, sometimes. I would report to them—I would meet them at the edge of forests, and we would confer. Sometimes I saw Purpled and Ranboo when they were steady, but never together, and it grew rarer towards the end until it was next to nothing." Ranboo blinked, confused, his mouth opening in a question before snapping it shut. He'd never told him. "And eventually, I would leave Pogtopia to join them, only coming back every few days to steal food from warehouses and hand them out to the older kids, who would, in turn, pass it down to the young 'uns."

"And your Feline friend, Alyssa, would write the words upon the walls with bright orange spray paint," Elijah said.

"Right," Tommy said. "They were lying to us about the food, see. If Chroma had gotten his head out of his arrogant ass—" Purpled coughed loudly, and Tommy cleared his throat. "—I mean, if the governor had been a bit less resolute and had called for aid, we would have made it. But by the time I snuck in—before I left Pogtopia permanently—the grass was already brown, and the animals were all dead. But I sent the message anyway and prayed that there were people out there to receive it."

"There were," Ranboo said. "Later. Much later."

"Too late," Purpled finished.

"The children were slowly cut down, one by one—group by group, whatever," Tommy said, feeling the beginning of tears prickling his eyes. "And—I had to watch. *We* had to watch—all of us in the crowd. Silence wasn't a thing anymore, but we were quiet to reserve energy. We were quiet, so we didn't let the anger show on our thin faces. We were quiet, so we wouldn't let the tears flow. We were quiet, but we were forced to clap at the deaths of our flatmates and friends and classmates to receive mere handfuls of food." His knuckles were white, but neither Purpled nor Ranboo showed on their faces if it was painful. "And the sky was always red in the mornings after the deaths—it would have been better to do it quietly. Why traumatize more kids into watching their friends die? *Why?*" It was a rhetorical question, and there was nobody in the current vicinity to answer it.

Chroma could, but Chroma wasn't here.

"The sky was always red," he repeated. "And the grass was always brown. That's how it was. It wasn't gold, and it wasn't beautiful, and it was dead and everyone was dying and there were more kids dead than alive now and we were getting nowhere."

Silence.

Purpled spoke up. "I was real sick," he said. "And I'm not proud of being sick."

"I was too," Ranboo said. "A different kind of sick. I have permanent memory problems 'cause of it. I can barely remember my time here." He exhaled. "Sometimes I don't know if I want to remember or if I want to keep the gaps. Sometimes I want the holes to fill so I can remember everything, but then I look at the horror on their faces—" He gestured at Tommy and Purpled. "—and I know I'm lucky to have mere glimpses."

"But being sick kept us alive," Purpled said. "'Cause when the others left three days before the *L'manburg* arrived—obviously, we didn't know that at the time; nobody did—they never came back. Or, well...three-fourths of them didn't."

"No," Tommy said, into the silence, because he knew that while Elijah had tried to prepare himself for this mentally—the Enderian was extremely horrified. Videos and transcripts were one thing, and firsthand tellings were another. "They never did. Three days before the *L'manburg* arrived, Alyssa, Foolish, and Grian were captured. Sorta dumb, innit?" He laughed, and it was a horrifying laugh. Horrified laugh. Didn't matter. "And the rest of us—trust me, there weren't many—we had to watch." He let out a breath. One at a time. One word at a time, one breath at a time. He tried not to close his eyes and they watered all the more because of it—because he was afraid of what he would see in his closed lids. If he was see that dastard stage; if he would hear the shots ringing in his ears. "I was there. In the crowd. If you look closely—I know the video's out there, I've seen it. If you look closely, I'm there. And my friends are on the stage and they are kneeling and they have a gun to their heads. And I move forward and someone holds me back and—and. And." He was out of breath and he didn't know why. "And then...Alyssa, always Alyssa, holds up her hand in a signal she's painted on the walls—it's not stars she painted, mind you, but a stupid hand signal that I created when the rebellion was nothing but a shallow thought in mind. It's not stars, but three fingers, and she holds them up to the end."

"The crowd does not clap," Purpled murmured, when Tommy broke off and bit his lip until it bled. "The claps do not start, and tears are shed. Two boys and a girl—two seventeen-year-olds and an eighteen-year-old. I was thirteen when I arrived in Pogtopia, and nearing sixteen by the end."

"I was fourteen," Ranboo said. "Sixteen by the end."

"I was the youngest," Tommy admitted, with a heavy heart. "Thirteen arriving, and fifteen leaving. Two years of my life. Two years that I—I. I don't know if I want them back, because then I wouldn't have met my friends."

Purpled continued. "The crowd does not clap," he repeated. "Chroma wants them to." It was not a memory he was reciting from, but a video. An audio-less video. "They are tired."

"*We* are tired," Tommy said. "So when Alyssa raises her hand in rebellion, we follow her. Stupid, really. Three more days and we would have lived. Stupid and *foolish*—" He cut himself off with a dumb smile. "—but we didn't know they were coming and we wouldn't have lasted the week, so we went down fighting. Or, well, as much as weaponless children can go down fighting."

"With fire in their eyes and steadiness in their hearts," Purpled said. "That's how they died."

Tommy wondered how many times he'd watched that video to see the final breath that his friends would give. If Purpled ever noticed the blonde boy struggling in the crowd, gasping for air with

tears on his face.

"I watched my friends die," Tommy said, and admitting it hurts so much more. "I watched them die and I keep watching them die in my head and I hear the shots in my ears and—and. Um. We are mad. We are angry. We are *children*, and so we follow Alyssa's hand sign like it means everything. Because—because it *does*. It means freedom. To us. Chroma orders a kill. On all of us. So the guards fire and people scream and. And I run, because I'm an Avian. Really, the only reason I escape. I run and I run and I go to the place that they—" He pointed at Ranboo and Purpled. "—are hiding and I think that that is the end. Because. Because there's nothing. Nothing left. They're dying; I'm dying, we're starving. There are mass graves. There is blood on the streets and nobody has bothered to clean the bright orange paint on the walls. There is a stage and there is gunfire every day and it's an everyday *thing*, then. I mean, it became the normal. That didn't mean we were used to it, but it *was* the norm. Pogtopia is in flames, both figuratively and literally. There's a week's worth of food left for two people, *if* they ration."

"So Tommy's an idiot," Purpled said, and Tommy frowned at him. "And, yeah. We thought we were going to die. Well, *we* didn't think anything. I was too sick near the end to do anything but lie there. Ranboo didn't remember. But. We were. And Tommy. He's fifteen. The guards are dead. The children are dead. And he's angry. Which, yeah, makes sense."

"The ship arrives," Ranboo said, speaking up. "I remember hearing the engines. I remember limping out of the entrance and I remember shouting at the sleek metal in the sky amidst the sunrise over brown grass and red skies. I remember the joy and the sorrow."

"You do?" Tommy asked him.

"Just barely," Ranboo said. "It's one of the happier memories, I think."

"It is," he confirmed. "Rescue."

"There are three of us," Purpled said. "There are three of us, and I'm barely supporting Ranboo 'cause Tommy's forcing me to walk towards the ship that's landed on the outskirts of Pogtopia. And then I turn around and he promises me that he'll come back and I can't—I can't stop him." Purpled let out a shaky breath. "I have a dying Enderian on my shoulders, and I'm dying myself, and I have to watch my *best fucking friend* walk away with anger and rage burning in his eyes because Chroma is escaping and he can't let that happen. And he's an idiot, and I tell him so." Purpled shook his head. "Didn't matter. He left us. And I didn't see him for two years. And I had to watch him walk away towards the mountains on shaky muscles and I watched him vanish—and six became

five became four became three became *almost three surviving*—became two because we never found him. I never—I never told them there was another that walked away, because I could not stop my best friend from walking to his death. I was ashamed, I suppose."

Tommy hadn't known that.

Tommy hadn't known many things.

"Now, I know this is about Pogtopia," Elijah said slowly. "But what happened after?" He had a horribly curious glint in his eyes.

Tommy glanced at Ranboo who shrugged, and then back at Purpled.

"I had hoped he would come back," the Human continued. "One day. But the weeks turned into months turned into a year and there was no sign of Tommy Innes, no sign of Chroma. No sign of either of them, no shipwreck. I finished school—early, of course. Ran went to medical school. He's an apprentice of sorts under our Chief Medical Officer. I became. I don't know. I knew things. I'm a quartermaster, because I hate not knowing things."

Tommy knew that. Tommy knew his best friend.

Because.

Purpled *was* his best friend. Just like Ranboo had Tubbo, and Lani had Drista. They were best friends.

"I knew things and pretended that I didn't know other things. Because sometimes it's hard to turn the page when you know someone won't be in the next chapter, but the story goes on. Life went by. Ranboo was...struggling. Slowly. I reminded him of who he was. I had to regale him in tales of what had happened. I watched articles and podcasts pour out of people who hadn't been there firsthand, and I wondered if I hadn't gotten so sick; if I could have saved more people."

Tommy wondered the same thing. Sometimes. All the time.

"Another year passed. We went on a mission and sent our Chief Operations Officer into a prison for information on—the Artifact. You know. It happens. And then. And then he calls in saying that there's nothing there and he sort of needs a rescue—and half of us crewmates watch as an Arachnid ship flies in near-circles around an entire fleet, and I wonder when Tubbo had learned to fly." And Purpled leaned forward and smiled, simple and genuine. "It's not Tubbo. It's another pilot, and I'm called to escort him—oh, I don't even know anymore. It doesn't matter. The elevator doors open and I'm facing him. It's been years. Those are his eyes, his hair, that same crooked grin on his face."

"What did I say?" Tommy mused. He laughed softly. "Right. You called me a dumb idiot."

"You *are*," Purpled said with a scowl. "And then you said hey. *Hey*. Two years of silence—of me thinking you were dead, and then. Hey. That's all."

"Then he asked me if Chroma was alive," Tommy said. He looked up. Right into the camera. "Because yes. He is. He's out there, and I don't know where. I hope he curls up and dies one day, but he's out there and I don't know if he's searching for us."

"He's *alive*?" Elijah demanded.

"Indeed," Tommy said with an angry curl of his lip. "But he'll be brought to justice. One day. You'll see. We're coming for him, you just wait and see."

"Watch your back, Chroma," Purpled said, his lips curling up terribly.

The three of them fall into a sullen silence, and Elijah leaned back, looking slightly unsettled as he turned towards the camera.

Tommy tuned the closing remarks out as well.

Holy fucking shit, what had he just done?

Chapter End Notes

"What do you think of the Pisces constellation? 7/10 for me." - Aria

"Yeah, love is dumb, I agree, it makes you do stupid things and think even stupider thoughts."

- Me

Well, what's your rating?" - Aria

"9/10..." - Me

"Why?" - Aria

"Well, I've always wanted to fall in love with someone." - Me

"Why that rating?" - Aria

"It's only 9/10 because I'm the 1 you need - " - Me, cringing internally.

...

...

"Okay, you can be my One, meleth nin."

- ARIA FUCKING CINABUN, 2021

Anyway that's the story of how I ended up dating my world-famous girlfriend Aria Cinabun, please applaud in our stupidity

The Language of Flowers

*"Where flowers bloom,
so does hope."*

- Lady Bird Johnson

The sun had touched the horizon by the time they exited the building. The streets were all but empty—everyone had presumably gone back to their homes; whatever homes they had on a godforsaken planet built on the bones and blood of children.

Techno met them outside. His hair was slightly out of place—by nothing more than an inch, but it was an inch too far and an inch out of character. "Our taxi comes in fifteen minutes," he said.

"Thanks," Purpled said warily. "The hovertrain takes like—five. So. I'm going to go watch the sunset." He all but strode off down the road towards the horizon, where a large star set and cast scarlet streaks of light across a pink-clouded sky. Ranboo followed him hesitantly.

Tommy paused near Techno when the half-Piglin shifted slightly. "Yes?" he asked.

"I didn't say anythin'," Techno said.

"You want to."

Techno stared at him, and Tommy stared back.

"I don't—" Techno started. "You—uh."

"I've never seen you at a loss for words," he teased.

"You did real good, Tommy," Techno said eventually. "Real good."

"You saw it?" he asked, not surprised in the slightest.

"Yeah," Techno said. "On my datapad. And, uh—if you were wonderin'—the crew saw it too. Tubbo found it first, actually, and then everyone watched." Tommy clenched his fists slightly. "I think. I think—that firsthand tellin's are far different than videos. Especially videos without audio."

"You don't say," he muttered.

"It's a bit more hauntin' when you have teenagers sittin' on a couch talkin' about what happened two—nearly three—years ago." Techno coughed. "Then you start to realize they were *really* children, 'n they weren't the youngest either."

"Thank you, Technoblade," Tommy said snappishly—and then sighed. "Sorry. I don't know quite why I did that."

"Ain't it obvious?" Techno asked him. "Nervousness, for one. I mean, you basically just broadcasted yourself to at *least* ten thousand people. People are gonna know who you are now. I mean, not that they didn't already, but, like, now you're *really* famous."

"Let's just hope that Chroma doesn't fucking hunt me down," he muttered.

Techno tilted his head. "He'll have to get through me first," the half-Piglin said gruffly. "And the entire crew of the *L'manburg*. And the Galactic Rebellion."

"But what if—"

"What if nothing," Techno said. "Stop thinking about what-if situations. Most of them are unrealistic and stupid." Tommy scowled angrily. "Look, kid. If Chroma's still alive in some

worthless corner of the universe, I hope he sees the rage on your face and *stays away*."

"Rage?" Tommy questioned.

"Yeah, when you said he was still alive—that's gonna be a lot of paperwork, by the way, because that's not public knowledge—you had this murderous look about you. And I love murderous looks myself, so Chroma better be fuckin' scared out of his mind. He'll have to team up with the Arachnids again—"

"No," Tommy said. "I don't—no. No." He let out a breath. "They're not. Um. No. They're not on the same side, I don't think. Pogtopia—the guards. They weren't Arachnids. Some scummy Humans and Felines and Merlings and Blazeborn and—and the like, I should think. But Arachnids? No."

Techno paused. "We've always assumed that they were the other side," he said carefully. "Even after what Purpled said. Are you meanin' to tell me they're a third party instead?"

Tommy's knuckles were white as he swallowed. "I—I don't know," he said honestly. Purpled's words about Arachnids and neutrality had gotten him to think—but he didn't know what he believed. "Chroma picked me up from the Wasteland the first time, so—maybe. But he didn't the second time. Actually, I have no idea if he knew I was there the second time. But—Pogtopia. It was never Arachnid-ridden. I don't think I saw Arachnids there at all."

"That's...interestin'," Techno said. "To say the least." He tapped his chin, looking deep in thought. "I used to assume they worked closely together."

Tommy shook his head. "No. No, maybe it was some business thing."

"Takin' children was a *business thing*?" Technoblade asked, raising an eyebrow.

"So was executing and starving them, I assume," he said stiffly. "For his stupid child army."

"...what?" Technoblade said carefully, as if he was treading carefully.

"Hmm?" Tommy said with a slight frown as he glanced at Ranboo and Purpled, who stood on a hill facing the sunset, slightly outside of Logstedshire, watching the sun set. He blinked away the tears of remembrance and turned away. Perhaps it did not haunt the dreams of Purpled and Ranboo, but it certainly did in his. Perhaps that was because the sunset signified the start of unwanted bloodshed. Perhaps because it was when the martyrdom had started, perhaps it was all of those things combined.

"Child army," Technoblade prompted.

"Oh," Tommy said. "That's what Chroma wanted us to become."

"It wasn't just a...school?" Techno asked.

"Nah," he said. "You got to learn to fire guns and shit when you were older. I was too young—the age was sixteen, and I think Purpled would have. If the stupid virus hadn't come along, I mean. We learned a lot of shit about war that they didn't bother us teaching in Fleet school. Or, I mean, I think they didn't. Seeing as Phil withdrew me."

"Like...what?"

"Tactics," Tommy shrugged. "Retreat. Defense. I learned how to fly as a co-pilot of Chroma." Techno shifted uneasily. "Don't give me that pity look, bitch. Grian said he was manipulating me."

"He probably was," Techno said, trying and failing to maintain a nonchalant expression. Tommy hadn't ever talked about this to anyone—not to Purpled, Ranboo, or anyone—except Grian.

Grian was long dead, and somewhere between hello and goodbye, there had been friendship. True friendship. Love.

"Yeah, I mean, looking back, I was an idiot," he snorted. "Chroma used to hit me, and I kept forgiving him. You know, like an idiot."

Techno stilled. "Right, yeah, you said that," he said. There was an edge of...something behind his voice.

"Used to leave bruises and shit when he was mad," Tommy said. "I used to forgive him, too. Then Grian came along and told me it wasn't normal and that just because he was mad, he didn't have any right to hit me."

"Well, Grian was right," Techno said tightly. "If he were here, I'd clap him on the back and buy him a drink."

"He'd be twenty."

"Yeah, that's legal according to Galactic law, for an Elytrian."

"Fair enough," Tommy said.

"So, let me get this straight," Techno said shortly. "You're a victim of physical abuse."

Tommy shifted. "No. Maybe."

"If you can't admit that, you need to go back to therapy."

"I don't need no fucking therapist," he snapped. Techno raised an eyebrow, and Tommy sighed. "Okay. Maybe. I'm still seeing Bad once a week."

"I don't think Bad knows you're a victim of abuse."

"It slipped my mind, okay?"

"How does *abuse* slip your mind?"

"It's just another bullet point on my extensive list," he snorted. "Compared to watching all my friends get publically executed, holding a new friend in my arm as she died from radiation poisoning, being literally experimented on, and watching my parents die...I mean, it wasn't that much of abuse. Light abuse."

"Yes, the four 'e's," Technoblade said. "Executions, experimentations, exploitations, and endings."

"That right about sums it up," he said.

"You have had a very unique experience. We can add that to the 'e' list. Experiences."

"That's certainly one way to state it," he said, nearly mirroring his previous sentence as he shoved his hands in his pockets and felt a slight grin creep across his face. "Besides, eh? I said it in there, and I'll repeat it. I'm here for a good life, not a long life."

"...well, you're not wrong," Techno said, and then his face softened slightly—as much as a half-Piglin with tusks could have a softened face, that is. "Anyway, good job in there, Tommy. Not that you care, but...I'm proud of you for facin' your past like that. Even if it was on galactic broadcast."

"I care," he said genuinely. "I do care. And thank you."

"No problem," Technoblade said, only now looking slightly uncomfortable—formalities, hmm. Not talking about abuse or death—but *formalities*—Technoblade gets uncomfortable with. That's...interesting.

Tommy hid his grin and turned towards the two boys on the hill. The sun was almost now completely gone—the speed the planet spun in was slightly different than Terra, so instead of the regular two to three minutes after touchpoint, it was five. "OI!" he shouted. "DICKHEADS! TIME TO GO!" He'd probably scandalized all the people within shouting distance.

Purpled, without turning, neatly flipped him off with his thumb and middle finger.

"YOU'RE FORGETTING YOUR POINTER FINGER IN THE SIGN!" he shouted. "GOTTA HAVE PEACE AND THE UPPER PART OF THE L, REMEMBER?"

"FUCK OFF, TOMMY!" Purpled yelled back, but as he turned, his back outlined in flames from the sun, Tommy could see the grin on his face. Ranboo gave what seemed to be a facepalm before both boys jogged back to Techno and Tommy.

Techno had his hand out, making the sign that Alyssa had so long ago—that had ended the Children's Rebellion and ended the children of Pogtopia. "What does it mean?" he asked skeptically.

"Peace, fuck you, and loser," Tommy said with a grin. "Let's be real. I was a kid."

"Let's be real, you still are a kid," Technoblade sighed, putting his hand back to his side and leading them back down the roads to the hovertrain, Tommy sputtering indignantly.

"*Look* here, you pig fuck—"

They were making their way to the taxi after the hovertrain when Ranboo paused, tilting his head and glancing towards the nearest group of golden trees—about thirty yards off or so. The sun was half-set, casting pretty lines of light across the ground and making it seem like a pinstriped red and gold carpet.

"Wait," the Enderian said softly, halting the party. "I need to do something first." He rushed off without looking back into the group of trees, his ears twitching and looking from side to side.

Technoblade tilted his head. "They have bathrooms on the ship," he said in a puzzled tone, mostly to himself, before shaking his head in bewilderment and pulling out his wallet to pay for the four's fare. Purpled raised an eyebrow at Tommy, who shrugged, watching the Enderian disappear into the trees.

The Human made a face. "Hope he doesn't make us miss it."

"I don't think he'd take that long," Tommy said honestly. Purpled shrugged again and boarded after Techno, who'd grabbed the tickets and gotten on without a second look back.

Tommy waited—because he knew that it wasn't just Ranboo wishing to relieve himself, but something else.

Sure enough, Ranboo popped into existence in an explosion of purple particles not ten seconds later. Tommy jumped slightly before letting out a breath, and even though Ranboo raised an eyebrow, they both chose not to dwell on it.

Never mind the fact that that was the first time that Tommy had seen Ranboo teleport in quite a while.

"What is that?" he asked, gesturing to a stem gently clasped between dulled claws.

That was a lie.

They both knew what it was.

"For you," Ranboo said and handed him an allium.

"I wish I had cherry blossoms to give back," he said, clutching the thing in his hands. It was frail and delicate, and one squeeze would forever ruin its beauty, and it would die soon; plucked by uncaring hands—but for now, it was his, and his alone. For now, it would live.

"I wish that *cosmos bipinnatus* still lived on this planet," Purpled said, surprising both of them as he appeared in the doorway of the shuttle. Tommy tilted his head in recognition. "I wish that the *Orchidaceae* hadn't faded; the *chrysogonum virginianum* hadn't died, and the *salvia* survived the

Pandoravirus—biotic plant infection," he clarified, when Ranboo scowled. "I wish the *Prunus serrulata* hadn't left so soon." Tommy winced, finally understanding the metaphor.

"The only reason alliums are here is because I planted them," Ranboo said.

"I know," Purpled replied.

"If you wanted the—ah, the *c-cosmos bipinnatus*—oh, why can't you use the mundane name, Purpled—to be back here, you'd need to replant them. I doubt the scientists would care, 'cause they were here before the biotic plant infection," Ranboo said, blinking rapidly.

"I don't think it wants to come back to this place," Purpled said and then smiled sadly. "If it comes here again, it'll just die."

Ranboo didn't say anything.

Tommy didn't even know what to say.

They'd just had an entire metaphorical conversation using flowers they'd once associated themselves with.

That was certainly a first.

Lani, Drista, and Tubbo had somehow managed to pinpoint their arrival time at the space station where the *L'manburg* had finished fueling up and were waiting for them as they disembarked.

"The adults just let you three run off?" Techno asked them, raising an eyebrow.

"They think we're in the game store," Tubbo replied, glancing between Tommy, Ranboo, and Purpled, an unreadable expression on his face.

"How the fuck did you even know we were coming?" Tommy demanded, fighting back a small yawn. After all, despite the fact that there was no sun to rise or fall around the space dock, his body was operating a bit on Terran time, on which it would have been three in the morning.

"Basic math," Tubbo said. "I looked up the taxi transport times on the Red Planet and ran a calculation on how long it would take to get from there to here after you finished your... you know. Interview."

"We watched it," Drista burst out, and Lani glanced at her feet. "Live. Tubbo found it 'cause he was bored and banned by Finn from the engineering level on account of dangerous gasses or something—not anything bad," she clarified hurriedly when she saw Tommy's concerned look. "It happens sometimes. Everyone's fine. Nobody even had to go to the medbay. But Tubbo isn't an engineer, so he couldn't be there and was sort of pouting. Since Ranboo was gone, he had nobody to annoy, and Philza and Kristin were busy with paperwork—you know, since Purpled wasn't there." The Human in question didn't look sorry in the slightest. "Nobody to nerd out with."

"I resent that," Tubbo muttered.

Drista didn't blink an eye. "I'm not wrong." Tubbo rolled his eyes, and Tommy hid a snicker. "He was just flipping through channels and then shouted when he saw you guys."

"Actually, I would have skipped through it, but the narrator was an Enderian and, you know, because of Boo, that interested me, and then I fucking realized that it was an interview of the Children's Rebellion. And *then* I realized that—wow, my husband is there!"

"We're divorced."

"—OH WAIT! MY HUSBAND IS THERE!" Tubbo gasped theatrically, clearly remaking what had—or hadn't—happened. "OH SHIT! OH, MY STARS!"

"...you literally let out a high-pitched scream that sent Niki and I both running," Lani said accusingly.

"No. I did not."

"Yes. You did."

"I did not," Tubbo scowled. "I was very mature."

"You literally used a hacked program to cut into Clementine's intercoms and told the entire ship in a panicked voice after Niki and I had entered the room that there was a live interview for the survivors of the Children's Rebellion," Drista said.

"Certainly sounds like him," Ranboo muttered. "Did it work?"

"Yes," all three kids said at once.

"Like ants to sugar," Tubbo said sheepishly.

"Oh, God," Tommy muttered. "How'd they take it?"

"With tears," Drista said honestly, and Tommy grimaced.

"You cried too, Drista," Lani pointed out.

"So did you!"

"My entire life is a sob story," he announced. "Please, continue crying." Purpled hit him in between the shoulder blades, and Tommy scowled at him. "What the fuck was that for?"

"Shut up," his friend told him. "It's not like every single person on the *L'manburg* watched you nearly have a mental breakdown over the fact that you're technically the only living person to have experienced the executions in person."

Tommy stared at him. Drista raised her eyebrows, and Lani clapped a hand over her mouth. Technoblade rubbed his forehead ruefully, like he didn't want to be there. Ranboo sighed miserably, and Tubbo sort of looked shocked.

"Oh, wait," Purpled said, ever the good friend. "You are. And they did."

"Thanks," he said sarcastically. "I really needed that spelled out for me."

"You're very welcome," Purpled said unblinkingly. "I know that you're an idiot sometimes. You should get that checked."

"Fucker," Tommy said.

"You're an odd person, Purpled," Lani said neutrally.

"Thank you, Chroma said that too." Everyone except Tommy and Ranboo looked slightly alarmed at hearing those words leave Purpled's mouth. "Except he said it far more offensively. With a sneer."

"Cut it out, Purpled," Tommy grumbled, elbowing the Human in the ribcage slightly. "You're terrifying everyone."

"It's dark humor."

"That doesn't make it funny," Ranboo pointed out.

"I mean," Tommy said. "It's *kind* of funny."

Technoblade broke the silence by clearing his throat, waving around his datapad. "Let's get back to the *L'manburg*," he said. "Phil and Kristin want to speak to Tommy."

He groaned. "I didn't even hurt myself! I didn't put one *pinky toe* out of line! They can't possibly be mad at me!"

"I didn't even say it was negative," Technoblade grimaced.

Tommy scowled. "Talking with adults is always negative," he said, as the seven of them began their journey towards where the *L'manburg* was docked. "I have 'sperience, bitch."

Tubbo dropped back and poked Tommy in the ribs, who yelled theatrically. "Suck it up," the Shulker said. "That did not hurt that bad. I'm really tiny."

"Yes, tiny Tubbo," Tommy teased.

"Shut up before I deck you," Tubbo stated, and Tommy fell silent. "You talk to adults just fine without it being negative! You played Uno with the Commander of the *Mira* and with the Chief Security Officer as well! They're adults."

"They're also..." he said, trailing off as Drista stiffened slightly. "They're Rae and Sykkuno, Tubbo."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"They're Avians," he said, throwing his hands up. "Spending time with them—even if it's over some stupid Terran card game over a video call at five in the morning—" Technoblade raised an eyebrow, because he was aware of Tommy's insomniac behavior. "—I mean, it helps. They're like —" He knew he was struggling for words right now. The *Mira* had left short-ranged communication levels—secondary datapads, like the crews'—a lengthy time ago, and long-ranged communications—video calls and primary datapads, which only Phil had—only three days ago. So. So what if he'd wanted to spend time with his—with them. Them. Avians. Even if he didn't have a

bond with Sykkuno, Rae did, and that meant technically she was the head of their flock, not that anyone gave her any respect—especially when she was cursing Sykkuno out in Uno for skipping her repeatedly. "—they're my friends," he finished lamely. Drista scowled angrily before quickening her walk and stalking through the gangplank onto the ship.

Sapnap, who had been falling asleep against the door, started at the loud footfalls of the Human girl. He blinked at Tommy, squinting at him pointedly. Tommy ignored him.

"What's her problem?" Tubbo asked loudly.

"Jealousy," Lani answered, as Tommy's mouth was half-open to answer the girl. He shut it with a snap as everyone turned to look curiously at the shortest member, who shrunk under the stares. "Uh. She's annoyed that Tommy technically has a familial connection to other people."

Tommy snorted. "*Legally*, that law hasn't been used in centuries," he pointed out. "It doesn't count when the entire population of Avia is destroyed, does it?"

"...I mean, it does, still?" Technoblade said, sounding confused. "Just because everyone is dead does not mean the law is dead."

"Yeah, but the Avians can't really enforce it," Ranboo said sensibly and then winced. "Uh. Sorry. Not what I meant, Tommy."

"You're not wrong," he said.

"Hey, what did Lani mean about a 'familial connection'—" Tubbo started.

Sapnap cut him off, thankfully, because Tommy *really* did not want to answer that question. "Are you guys okay?"

"No, we got attacked by space pirates on the way back," Purpled deadpanned. Technoblade snorted, shaking his head, and Ranboo facepalmed.

"Haha. Very funny," Sapnap said. "Though with Tommy's track record, I almost wouldn't be surprised." Tommy flipped him off cleanly. "Anyway. I watched the broadcast." The Blazeborn blinked, seeming to struggle with words.

"Yeah," Tommy said dryly. "The whole ship did, courtesy of bee boy over here."

"That's a horrible nickname," Tubbo complained. "I talk about bees *once*—"

"You were talking about pheromones of bees, and I didn't want to hear about it," Tommy shrugged. "I like my reproduction with humanoids, please."

Tubbo scowled. "Communication, Tommy. Not sex." Ranboo snorted loudly, and Purpled was just shaking his head in disbelief. "Bees communicate through pheromones. They also have five eyes and six legs and—"

"I really don't care."

"Fuck—"

"Children," Technoblade drawled. "As fascinatin' as this conversation is, I would like to go back to my books and far away from any kids."

"Of course, *commander*," Sapnap said, a touch teasingly and scathingly all in one bite. "Please, you first." Technoblade reached out and swatted the Chief Security Officer's shoulder—which wasn't that hard, because Sapnap was about as tall as Tommy was. And Technoblade, with his Piglin genes, easily towered three-fourths of a foot taller than both of them.

Tommy was stepping onto the *L'manburg*, blinking at the dim lights—the ship time was around three in the morning, after all—when Technoblade stopped him. Purpled frowned, confused, but Tommy waved him onwards and mouthed goodnight. The Human boy shrugged but waved his temporary goodbye with Ranboo and Lani before turning the hallway corner.

"Yes?" he asked. "I'd like to go get some sleep, please."

"You drooled all over my shoulder on your nap back from Pogtopia," Technoblade said. "You're not sleepin' anytime soon, Theseus." Tommy scowled at the nickname. "You don't sleep anyway."

"Nor do you," he argued.

"I only need four hours to feel extremely well-rested," Techno said.

"I don't like sleeping," he said.

"Because people will stab you in the back?"

"No," Tommy said. "Nobody is going to stab me in the back." He pointed at the ceiling. "Clementine would stop them. Or, you know—any of the security officers. And you. And just about everyone."

» Tommy makes a fair point, Commander. «

"Yeah, yeah," Technoblade grumbled. "At least you're not like Humans. They need like—nine hours. Eight. Avians need seven, which is less."

"Less is more."

"It's really not," the commander retorted. "I make up for all my missed sleep by sleepin' for like a week." He made a face. "Hibernation, I think it is, in Standard." Tommy frowned. "Anyway, I know you don't plan on sleepin' anyway. So don't make that excuse."

"Okay," Tommy said, annoyed. "Why'd you call me over here? Not because of my terrible insomnia, surely."

"You should go see Bad."

"I already saw Bad," he said with a scowl. "It was annoying enough."

"That was before we added another *bullet point* to your extensive list," Techno said, half-quoting what Tommy had said earlier that day. "You know. Physical abuse."

Tommy snorted. "Believe it or not, Technoblade, that really doesn't affect me that much." The half-Piglin didn't look convinced, and Tommy sighed. "Look. Many things have happened to me—and most of 'em ain't happy. Physical abuse is sort of the least of my worries. It's overshadowed in my dreams by gunfire and the setting sun over an ocean of blood." Techno's face didn't change at that harsh description. "It's overshadowed by the sound of ship explosions and the fact that Chroma wouldn't get out of my head." Tommy rolled his shoulders. "So just—leave it. It was just a few bruises. He never broke any bones. Grian helped me until I broke free."

"If you're sure," Techno said, trailing off. "I'm still gonna tell Wilbur and Philza."

"Do you have to?" he asked warily.

"They care about you, Tommy," Techno replied.

"I know," he said miserably.

Strong arms wrapped around his shoulders, and Tommy relaxed minutely in the grasp of the commander, letting out a breath of air and leaning against his warm chest. Techno's chin rested on his head, and they shared the same space for about three seconds before Techno released him.

"Good night, Theseus," Technoblade said finally.

Tommy raised a hand and saluted him sharply, a shit-eating grin crossing his face that was entirely real. "Good night, Blade." His smile faded slightly as the half-Piglin rounded a different corner that the others had, towards the commanding sleeping quarters.

After a second thought, Tommy headed towards his own quarters, entering it without bothering to turn on the light. He let out a very manly shriek when two baleful eyes blinked at him from the darkness, purple and white flecks staring at him.

"Oh, you fucker," he snorted, bending down and patting Mellohi's body from where she was lying on his bed. She yowled slightly, scratching him with one claw—in his opinion, that was her way of showing love because it didn't cut too deeply, just stung a bit. He scratched her ear and then walked over to his bookshelf, where twenty-two books were—one of them was the Fleet school manual, which Phil had given him, another one a book on spaceships and their controls, given to him by Tubbo, and a third the book on Grecian mythology that Techno had gotten him for his birthday what seemed like ages ago. Fourteen of them were *The Wheel of Time*—he was about halfway done with those. The last five were a group of books that Ranboo had gotten him—a series written centuries and centuries ago in the Terran twenty-first century. Tommy had, so far, read the first and second book and was halfway through the third.

He smiled as he stared down at the covers of a black-haired boy and some sort of flying horse and took the fifth book in his hands.

"The Last Olympian," he read softly, and drew the slightly-crushed allium out of his pocket—blame Technoblade for that one—and tucked it randomly in the middle of the pages, crushing it as he closed the book and tucked it tightly back into the shelf. "Thanks, Ranboo," he said, to nobody at all, and pet Mellohi one last time before leaving the room, leaving a small crack in case the dhi'sk wanted to leave.

In between pages, a flower lay, waiting for the moment that the owner would open its pages and read its words and see the dried blossom of a crushed past.

SPY KIDS!!!!

Chapter Notes

Hi, Juliet here - Aria is banned from her computer by me, her parents, and her doctor because we managed to get into a car crash yesterday due to some idiot deciding it was a good idea to text and drive. She has a sprained left wrist and a healing dislocated finger on her right hand. I only managed to walk away with a cracked rib, fortunately.

THE SHOW MUST GO ON!!! HERE IS ANOTHER CHAPTER!!!

"Juliet, why are we going to the hospital?

I need to write another chapter of

The Children's Rebellion."

- Aria Cinabun ft a sprained wrist and a dislocated finger

Later the next day, Phil called a meeting with the lieutenants and the bridge commander—probably to do with their next mission since they'd been waiting for one for half a month. Since he wasn't cleared—obviously—Tommy waved goodbye to Tubbo, who had been sitting in the back of the makeshift classroom with Ranboo and Purpled, playing Mario Space-Cart. Then he turned back to his datapad homework on geometric shapes and wracked his brain, trying to remember what Grian had been absolutely obsessed with on Pogtopia.

God, he hated Advanced Subspace Geometry. He'd shared that class with Sniff. Internally, he winced.

"The tangent of theta is the adjacent over the hypotenuse, right?" Lani asked tentatively into the quiet room.

Tommy answered before their temporary math teacher, Harvey, could even look up from his daily ship scannings.

"It's the opposite over the adjacent, actually," he said numbly. He'd been dodging people all day—and had only run into Wilbur, who had hugged him until Tommy had struggled out of his grasp with a glare and had stalked off to find the bathroom. Other than that, he'd been holed up in the temp classroom with the rest of the children. Usually, he hated it, but now he was just glad that Harvey was pretending that the interview that he'd given yesterday hadn't ever happened.

"Nice job, Tommy," the Feline said. "That's correct." He returned to shifting through power relays—or, at least, Tommy assumed they were power relays. Tommy basked in the praise before scowling and returning to his own paper.

» Sorry to interrupt, Junior Lieutenant Harvey, but the bridge has a message for the room. «

Harvey glanced up, a look of surprise crossing his face. Tommy put down his screen pen and wondered what they wanted to tell him.

"I wonder what kind of mission they're doing," Drista muttered under her breath.

"Just for us?" Harvey clarified.

» Yes, sir. This message is not hitting any other parts of the ship except for you. I am quite sure that they would have sent a message to your datapads if Lieutenant Tubbo hadn't wisely pointed out that Purpled could have convinced you all to play a video game and leave your pads behind. «

Purpled snorted loudly.

"Right," Harvey said, glancing towards the screen, which was currently on pause as Ranboo and Purpled waited for Clementine to speak. "What's the message?"

» They want the adolescents in Briefing Room One. «

Harvey paused, eyes going from Tommy to Ranboo to Purpled. Tommy did not miss the look in his eyes that screamed *Children's Rebellion*.

"All of them?" the Feline asked, phrasing his question carefully.

» Yes. «

There was a pause.

» I am not allowed to give my own opinion, but my late captain always told me that I should be able to. I cannot read minds...but I believe, as the term goes...I know what you are thinking. «

Tommy winced, thinking of the coding that Sam had worked so hard on.

» This has nothing to do with the Children's Rebellion. «

He did not know whether he is relieved or angry.

» Captain Philza is very angry with Rear Admiral Toast at the minute, as orders from command have *suggested* that the next mission be given to the *L'manburg* on account of there being people below the age of eighteen.«

"Thank fucking goodness," Tommy muttered, hands unclenching from his chair. "Wait, what the fuck does that mean?"

» I have already given out too much information, Ensign Tommy. You will need to head to Briefing Room One for more details. «

"Thanks, Clem," he grumbled under his breath as he pushed his chair back and stood up, stretching slightly. Drista swore under her breath when she hit his arm as she stood up and flicked it sharply with two of her fingers, causing him to pause in stretching and scowl at her in annoyance.

"Good luck," Harvey said carefully, tilting his head and betraying little to no emotion of his opinion on Clementine's words. "Make sure to get your work done by two days. I'll check them."

"If we're not off on some super-secret mission," Drista said excitedly.

"Doubtful," Harvey replied. "All six of you?"

Tommy bit his lip until Purpled reached over and slapped his shoulder. "Cut that out," he hissed. "You can't possibly be afraid of six."

"It's a cursed number," he hissed back.

"It was *one* time."

"So *far*!"

"Let's just...go," Lani said quickly. Tommy grabbed his datapad and exited out of his schooling, turning it off and shoving it in his pocket. Lani vanished hers with a quick touch, and Drista rolled her eyes. Ranboo reached over and turned off the game, leaving the controllers on the couch as the Enderian stood up.

"I bet it's a secret mission," Drista announced again, when they were safely out of Harvey's hearing.

"Doubtful," Purpled said, quoting what the Feline had told her the first time. Drista glowered at the Human in annoyance. "*Us*? With *Tommy's* track record?"

"Hey!" he complained. "My track record is perfect, thank you very much! Antfrost and Velvet were very proud of me."

"Am I wrong?"

"I never said you were."

They reached the lift, and Tommy reached over and typed in the code—seven-eight-three-four—and smirked in satisfaction as the lift doors opened.

"I still don't understand how you know that," Drista grumbled.

"*You* do," he pointed out.

"Yeah, but Dream told me," the girl said.

"I saw Sapnap type it in my first day here," he admitted, watching curiously as Purpled pressed the button below the bridge floor. He'd never been there before—it was all meeting rooms and, apparently, briefing rooms. "He wasn't very secretive."

"I'll talk to him," Purpled grumbled. "If you *were* a spy, you'd be able to use the lift however you please."

» Most people don't bother with the code, Quartermaster Purpled. They simply ask me to open the doors. «

Purpled scowled. "The day that Clementine gets sabotaged is the day half the ship can't go up the elevators." Ranboo coughed quietly.

The doors opened, and Tommy followed the magenta-eyed Human out the doors, glancing curiously at the small room that the lift opened onto. It had about eight doors, two on each wall, each labeled some sort of meeting room.

"That one," Purpled said as if it weren't evident by the *Briefing Room 1* plating. He didn't even bother to knock as he opened the door—which had, unfortunately, been soundproofed.

Unfortunately.

Because the minute Purpled opened the door, Tommy was subjected to two different parties yelling at each other.

"—HAVE NO RIGHT TO ASK THEM TO DO SUCH A THING!" Philza yelled, his wings splayed and bristling angrily, black feathers already littering the floor. Tommy winced, even as he saw Kristin put a hand on Phil's shoulder reassuringly, though there was a thunderous look on her face. Techno was also standing by his captain's side, but his fury was more of a silent one.

"It was not my choice," Toast said firmly, through some sort of video screen that Tommy couldn't see. "Command—"

"FUCK Command!" Wilbur screeched. Ranboo, Tommy, and Purpled cringed at the loud, angry voices.

"THEY'RE OUR FAMILY!" Dream shouted angrily.

Tubbo just looked resigned, two hands over his ears and curled up in a chair.

"Let's try this again," Drista said firmly, grabbing the door from Purpled's grip and slamming it shut as hard as she could. Tommy let out a small breath, telling himself that they weren't mad at him. They waited a second, and then Drista opened the door, also loudly.

The room was quiet when they entered.

Kristin was the first to speak. "Sorry," she said apologetically. "We didn't hear you enter the first time."

Tommy scanned the table, throwing himself down in the seat next to Tubbo, who smiled gratefully at him. Seemed the Shulker didn't like yelling all that much either. Ranboo hesitantly took the chair on Tubbo's other side, and Purpled, Lani, and Drista found empty seats around the table as well.

"I fucking wonder why," Drista snapped angrily. "Jeez—you call us up here, and the first thing that we hear when we enter is all this screaming."

"I apologize for that," Phil said finally, and Tommy raised his eyes and met the eyes of the eight people sitting on the other side of the video call.

Sykkuno, Rae, Toast, and Corpse, he all recognized instantly. Rae gave him a small wave, though it was slightly muted as she glanced between her crewmates. Sykkuno gave him a small grin—

nothing much was able to get his optimism down—and Toast threw Tommy a slight glance as well, inclining his head in short greeting.

Tina, the short Feline with the ruined ears, smiled brightly at him when he made eye contact, and Pokimane, the pretty Human woman, smirked slightly, though it was more at Drista's actions than Tommy himself. Hafu wasn't looking at him; her brow was furrowed as she looked at both Lani and Tubbo.

The last was a Phantom, though Tommy didn't remember his name, with brown hair and a small leaf hat on his head, as well as a dark pink scarf surrounding his neck.

"So," he said, breaking the silence. "What the fuck is going on?"

Technoblade hissed under his breath, and Wilbur turned his head away to hide the mirth shining in his eyes. Phil pinched his forehead.

Toast only looked amused. "There is a mission—"

"No, Toast," Phil said. "I won't accept this."

"It is not in your power to refuse," Corpse said in his low voice. "I'm sorry, Phil. We were forced to pass this on as well. Command doesn't like the fact that you have teenagers aboard your ship, so they're going to use them in every way possible."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Purpled retorted, standing up, his magenta eyes flashing.

Techno reached over and used his hand to force Purpled to sit back down. "It's nothing—too bad."

"No remote institutions?" Ranboo spoke up hoarsely. One of his hands was held by Tubbo, who was tapping it quietly. "No red sunsets?"

"No—no, of course not," Toast said, holding his hands up. "Nothing like that. "The six of them—" he pointed each of the teens out by turn. "—have been tasked with a mission to gather some information at a dance."

"A...dance?" Tommy said dumbly. "Why us?"

"Because it's a school dance," Rae spoke up, sounding tired. Tommy stiffened slightly. "Nothing—nothing like *that*," she clarified. "It's a good school. An institution. On a city planet."

Tommy wondered if she'd watched the interview.

"But it *is* in neutral space," Toast said, and Tommy winced. "And they'll know if you've lived beyond eighteen years of life. So—you know. Children."

"Child soldiers," Purpled choked out.

Everyone in the room looked horrified.

"No!" Toast said. "You're not *fighting* anyone. You just have to steal some documents!"

"Oh, thank fucking *god*," Ranboo muttered.

Phil looked confused. "You're relieved?"

Ranboo threw up his hands. "For all the information we've been told, we could have been sent to another Pogtopia with another crazed aristocratic governor and had another Children's Rebellion on our hands." The entire room winced. "So. Yeah. I'm glad it's just information retrieval at a dance."

"Right," Toast said. "Kids from all over the galaxy are going to be coming to his dance. Something of a social standing, or whatnot."

"So...royalty," Tubbo said.

"Yes, exactly."

"I hate royalty," Tubbo muttered. Ranboo elbowed him.

"Why them?" Phil said hoarsely. "Haven't they been through enough?"

"It'll be fine," Toast said. "The planet isn't going to get attacked. It has heavy shields and an armada of spaceships." He paused. "Which is why we can't sneak any of *you* in. We need a legitimate reason. So—the dance."

"We're not nobles or royalty or the sons of politicians, though," Purpled pointed out wisely.

"Yes," Toast said. "But three of you are the survivors of the Children's Rebellion."

Silence.

"No," Phil said. "No, *no*. No fucking way. I won't allow this!"

"This is absurd," Wilbur whispered. "You're using their *trauma* as some puzzle piece for a *mission* ____"

"It's not *some mission*," Toast said quietly, and Wilbur fell silent at the seriousness that radiated from his voice. "It's the sightings of—of Chroma." And his voice broke, and Toast's voice *never* broke.

Tommy squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to let the tears fall. To his left, he heard Ranboo take in a sharp breath, and the sound of wood cracking was definitely Purpled holding a pencil far too tightly.

"No," Ranboo said. "What?"

"Apparently, some people have been keeping a trail of him," Toast said. "But, Captain Philza, it is not up to you to decide whether you accept or deny this mission. They may be your *crew*, but it is up to them."

Everyone was, blissfully, silent.

Tommy stared at the table. Traced the lines of the wood. Pretended that the last five minutes hadn't happened. Information that—that traced Chroma's steps? Could they *find* him?

They could finally take him down.

"That's not fair," Wilbur finally burst out. "What if Chroma finds out they're on the list? What if he's—"

"Shut the *fuck* up, Wilbur Soot," Purpled snapped, and everyone turned their head to stare at him, surprised. "This is not your battle to fight. This is not your war. You are not in my head. You do not control us. Back. Off." Wilbur blinked at him, surprised. "Ranboo? Tommy?"

"I want—" Ranboo cut himself off. "Ah. I don't know anymore. I do want—I want him gone." He squeezed his eyes shut, and Tubbo leaned against him helpfully. "I want him out of my nightmares."

"Tommy?"

Tommy blinked slowly and then looked up to see the careful eyes of Purpled. Actually, everyone was staring at him.

"I accept," he found himself saying, and he could almost hear his own heart pounding in his chest. He was scared. Terrified, even. "I want him *dead*."

"Tommy—" Techno said.

"No," he said. "I. Want. Him. Dead. Even if it means I do this mission *alone* and have to talk to idiots about that—that *place*—" He swallowed and forced the bile down. "—he killed my friends. I want him dead. And if this mission helps take him down, then I'll fucking do it, alone or not."

"You're not alone," Purpled said. "I'd follow you anywhere, dumbass." Tommy smiled at him, gratitude shining from his face.

"I'll—I'll do it too," Ranboo said, a touch more hesitantly.

"I gotta follow my husband," Tubbo announced. "Besides, who's supposed to take down the security from the inside?"

"Hopefully a bug," Toast said, amused.

Tubbo waved his hand. "I meant if everything goes wrong."

"I sure hope not," Dream gritted out.

"I'm coming too!" Lani said. "I gotta stop my brother from boring everyone with his talks of thermodynamics."

Drista snorted. "Well, count *me* in from the start," she proclaimed. "I've always wanted to go on a mission. I never got to before."

"Drista," Dream hissed.

"*What?!*"

"You don't have to come," he reminded Ranboo quietly during their mission brief, in which Techno was scowling the whole way through as he traced out the plan the bridge crew—and Purpled—had come up with. Tommy had had no say in it, which was fine, because he wouldn't have even known where to begin.

Ranboo gave him a bewildered look. "Of course I'm coming," he said.

"You don't have to come," he told Drista in the training hall, as the girl instructed him on how to shoot a phaser—not because it was necessary, but so as to waste some of the three days' time it would take to reach Kinoko, the neutral-zone planet that the ball was taking place on. And avoid the adults of the *L'manburg*, all of whom were furious and on edge and snappy.

She scowled at him as she adjusted his shoddy grip. "You bastard," she said. "Don't try to talk me down from adventure."

"You don't have to come," he told Tubbo, interrupting him in the middle of his discussion on stellar phoenixes—also known as neutron stars.

Tubbo frowned at him. "Shut the fuck up," he said. "Now, as I was saying, on average, the gravity on a neutron star is two billion times that of Terra and can actually *bend* radiation..."

"You don't have to come," he said to Lani, who was prodding at the small scar on his arm leftover from Ms. Zahendia's claws and the tracker that had once lain beneath his skin. Now, of course, he wore the small bracelet everywhere—and Lani, Drista, and Tubbo were due to get theirs any day now.

Lani gave him a frank look. "The day I don't come is the day you fall down a flight of stairs and break a leg."

"I'm an Avian! I can't fall!"

Not unless I want to, he didn't say. By Lani's look, she was thinking it too.

"I don't care," she said instead. "Besides, I've never been to a dance."

"You don't have to come," he told Purpled quietly, in the middle of his bedroom, with Mellohi on his lap and Ca'jat by his feet. Both dhi'sks looked up at him balefully, as if they could understand the stupid words pouring out of his mouth.

Purpled snapped his book shut, glaring at him. "What did I say about being selfish, Tommy?" he chided. "Besides, if anyone's gonna kill Chroma, it's gonna be *me*."

Tommy was scared of the conviction in the Human's voice.

Phil was still mad at Toast. Which made sense.

But honestly, Tommy wanted to take down Chroma so severely that his chest hurt.

He only prayed that the Avian wouldn't be waiting for him.

Less than half a day before they would stop so Tommy could fly a shuttle to Kinoko—after Dream's *sharp* eye, he'd flown it around a bit outside the *L'manburg*—he walked into the gym.

He still didn't have his piloting license, but one was forged for him.

It counted, eh?

Initially, he'd just been meaning to jog around the track—not even as an Avian, just usually, but he paused when a shadow passed over him and saw Phil flying around. A *touch* angrily, if you asked him—if flying could ever be called angry.

"Phil," he called. The gym was empty, and his voice echoed, so Tommy watched the Elytrian wheel around and dive slightly, coming into a running halt about ten feet from him.

"Hey, mate," the captain said.

"You look mad."

"I'm not mad."

"That's such a lie," Tommy snorted. "And here everyone thought *I* was terrible at lying, Jesus."

Phil sighed and rubbed at his head. Fortunately, he was not wearing a god-awful bucket hat, which would have made this conversation a whole lot funnier. "I'm more...displeased," the Elytrian admitted, his wings bristling slightly.

"With me?"

"No," Phil said quickly. "No, of course not. Never."

"Oh," Tommy said, shoulders slumping slightly in relief. "I sorta thought maybe you were mad that I accepted the mission."

"It *was* your choice," Phil said. "I'm displeased that they offered the position to minors in the first place." He made a face, scrunching his nose in distaste.

"I mean, we *technically* are crew members," Tommy said. "Gotta pull our weight."

"No...that's not how that works...but...Chroma?" Phil asked tiredly, as if he'd had this conversation before. Seeing as Tommy had been avoiding the adults, maybe he had.

"It's fine," Tommy said. "We need to take him down."

"You don't *need* to do anything," Phil said.

"I *want* to," he said.

"Do you?" Phil asked him. "Do you want that blood on your hands?"

Tommy tilted his head. "Maybe," he admitted. "I mean, I've killed people before." Phil blinked at him slightly before turning away. "Merikh Rience's guards, remember?"

"Ah," Philza said, and he laughed a not-laugh. "That was before we knew you were a survivor—never mind the *leader*—of the Children's Rebellion." He shook his head. "It made sense once you said it. The puzzle pieces just...clicked."

"Chroma deserves to die," he said furiously.

Philza tilted his head at him in a very birdlike fashion. "The diplomat in me—blame Kristin—says that I should tell you that there are other ways of getting revenge than murder," he said finally, and Tommy bristled. "But—" the Elytrian continued hurriedly. "—the realistic part of me knows that Chroma probably deserves to face the wrath of the survivors of his choices. Even if that's death."

"You'd let me...kill him, just like that?" Tommy asked uncertainly.

"I don't think I would *stand by* and *watch*," Phil said, crossing his arms and raising an eyebrow. "I don't think any of us would. Particularly Purpled. If anything, it's a competition on who would pull the trigger first."

Tommy swallowed, thinking of the pure rage hiding in the Human's eyes. "Definitely Purpled," he said faintly. Purpled would pull that trigger without fail. Tommy...Tommy would have far more of a problem with it, especially after everything.

"Merikh Rience is locked up forever," Philza said. "He will never escape." Tommy swallowed again, tilting his head in a question. "I—I don't know much about what they do to prisoners. They might be...torturing him." He studied Tommy carefully, as if he might not like that.

"Merikh Rience destroyed the *H.M.S Fran* and killed my father and my aunt, not to mention the rest of the Avians aboard the ship," he said resolutely. "We were already few, and then we became four." Tommy shook his head. "I was angry, and I killed his men because they would have killed my friends to get to *me*—not that they knew I was me—and it is a pity that he did not die."

Tommy was not a hero. He would not be one of those people who lowered his weapon and gave the villains a second chance. That was not how the world worked. The other side would never offer him a second chance, and so Tommy would watch his enemies burn—or he would die first. Either or.

"But I'm glad that he has some use to the Galactic Rebellion," he said. "I'm glad that he's getting the pain he deserves. Death is too simple, too *quick*."

"And yet you would kill Chroma?" Phil asked quietly.

"Yes," Tommy said. "He's too slippery."

"Wasn't your family religious?" Phil said. "Don't you believe in, like—God punishing the wicked?"

Tommy grinned, and it was violent and furious and authentic. "God can get the fuck in line."

Phil stared down at him. "I was talking with Kristin, Tommy," he said slowly. Tommy raised an eyebrow. "I mean, I'll never replace Sam, or—uh, or Clara, or even Puffy, but if you would have it..." he trailed off, fumbling for words.

"And here I thought you had a diplomat for a wife," Tommy teased, though inside, his heart was pounding in his chest. Phil couldn't—Phil couldn't *mean* that, could he? "Cat got your tongue?"

"Maybe it's your damn dhi'sk," the captain retorted, and then softened. "No. I have—we were—"

"You want to adopt me," Tommy said flatly.

Phil winced. "Yes."

Tommy blinked at him. "For the mission, or for...?"

"NO!" Phil yelped. "No, *no*. I mean, it'll help to have actual parental papers, but—but it's *you*. I adopted Techno and Wilbur at one point—I guess it's past time for you to join the chaotic little shits." There was a pause. "If you want, of course."

"I'd love to," Tommy said. Phil smiled at him. "But I'm not calling you Dad."

"That's fine," Phil said. "You'll never have to, if you don't want."

Tommy reached forward and hugged the captain, turning his head so his ear pressed into Phil's chest. He sighed as dark feathers wrapped around him and encompassed them both in a really soft blanket.

"You know," he said. "For someone so old, you sure have soft feathers."

"You *little* shit."

"HEY! I'M A BIG MAN!"

He signed the papers with Phil and Kristin by his side, and looked up as he finished the final scrawl with a smile on his face—because he had an official family again.

They would never replace his first, but that didn't mean they couldn't be just as good.

Yes, Mission Leader

*“Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity;
and I'm not sure about the universe.”*

- Albert Einstein

"This is Red Sixty-Nine, leaving docking bay," Tommy said, glancing behind him at Purpled, Drista, Lani, Ranboo, and Tubbo, who were all strapped to their seats, wearing various fancy outfits bought by Niki and Eret—and Purpled, who'd blackmailed Techno during their mission brief into letting him come because of his 'amazing fashion sense'.

› *Tommy, that is not your ship's designation.* ‹

Tommy snorted loudly at Wilbur's sensibly annoyed voice—it was his oh-so-humble opinion that the entire crew was on edge. Especially since Niki was adamant he had some sort of curse with leaving the *L'manburg*.

Which was frankly ridiculous.

"Okay, *Lieutenant Soot*," he said in a mocking voice. "This is CS-847, leaving the docking bay. Standing by for clearance." CS stood for civilian shuttle, seeing as they were pretending to be civilians.

Most of them, anyway. Half of them. Purpled was going to be 'sick,' and Tubbo and Lani 'weren't coming'. That way, all the disappearances wouldn't confuse the crowd and spring up questions.

So Ranboo, Drista, and Tommy were basically distractions while Purpled, Tubbo, and Lani worked together to sneak into the back rooms. Lani was the one stealing the drive and the folder, as she was a Shulker and could hide it easily. Tubbo was in charge of technology, seeing as the planetary-wide signal inhibitor would stop all communications to and from the *L'manburg*. Purpled would be directing Lani through the vents, scouting out who was where and what was what as the girl walked through the hallways.

This should be easy.

In theory.

› *CS-847, you are cleared for exit. Have a safe flight.* ‹

"Thank you, Wilbur," he said, pulling back the power and flying out into space. The pale yellow star of the solar system glinted at him through the shuttle window. "We'll be touching down in T-minus ten minutes." Despite the *L'manburg* being unable to land on Kinoko, they were close enough to theoretically send help if the children weren't in contact distance by midnight.

› *Good luck, Tommy.* ‹

Tommy turned off transmissions with a slight glance at Drista, who was acting as his co-pilot. She flicked off the blinking switch—turning off the open mic—and Tommy grumbled slightly, shifting in his seat.

"This suit is so uncomfortable," he muttered, glancing down with a grimace at his dark red dress button-up dress uniform, complete with a belt and pale scarlet lines and lapels. Turning around, Ranboo was dressed in nearly identical—but larger—wear, though his dress uniform did not have vertical stripes crossing the shoulder, nor a gleaming golden belt courtesy of one Technoblade—and it was also black and white. They both had matching black suit pants, though.

"Suck it up, buttercup," Purpled said with a fond scowl. "At least you won't have to be crawling through dusty vents."

"You literally chose to do that," Drista said with a scowl, glancing at Purpled's black mission uniform, complete with a dark violet vest—Purpled had pulled that one out of his ass—that had many pockets full of knives and other valuable gimmicks, and a holster with a phaser on his right thigh. "I had no choice in my clothes." She stood up and started pacing angrily, her sage-green princess-shouldered dress swishing angrily in her wake. Tommy watched her with mild amusement. Sometimes she tripped over the floor-length skirt and delved into long strings of curses.

"You look pretty," Lani offered up helpfully. The Shulker and Tubbo were both wearing identical uniforms to Purpled, though one had a blue vest and the other had a forest green.

"Doesn't mean I wouldn't rather wear a suit," Drista said with a scowl. "I can't walk properly! And with the scanners, I can't even hide a gun!" Tommy frowned and fingered the butterfly knife in his pocket—pink because Purpled had gotten him it.

"You can have knives, though," he said.

"Yeah, but that's not as useful as a *gun*, Tommy," Drista said condescendingly.

"Don't patronize me."

"You are both ridiculous," Purpled sighed. "Tommy, you're not allowed to pull a knife on anyone. That's specifically why Dream didn't give one to Drista."

He scowled. "How am I supposed to show the women how epic I am?" Tubbo rolled his eyes.

"The only reason women would ever be interested in you is to increase their social standings," Purpled told him. "Not because they actually like you. That's sort of how the court works."

"Meh meh meh meh, my name is a color, and I know everything," Tommy said in a mocking voice.

"*Don't* fucking say that," Purpled said, pulling the phaser out of his pocket and twirling it around his finger. Tommy rolled his eyes. "Can you please pilot the spaceship before we crash into the sun?"

"It's on autopilot, dickhead," he said. "The only reason I'm here is to land and take off this fucker."

"I'm sure you've had lots of practice with that....?" Ranboo said, a tad hopefully.

"I mean, Chroma taught me how to land and take off fighters," Tommy said. Purpled raised an eyebrow. "The rest of 'em have all been sims. Dad and Aunt Puffy would give me some, and I did a few on Terra as well. I'm like ninety percent sure Phil is gonna install some on the *L'manburg* too. Oh—and Dream made me practice flying around in this one when we were at a standstill."

"I'm glad we can trust your piloting skills with Chroma's teachings," Drista said sarcastically.

"Terrible person, great pilot," Tommy said.

"Don't compliment the bastard," Purpled snapped.

"I hate him too, Purpled, but he was the only reason I was able to fly that Arachnid craft out of the Wasteland with Tubbo bleeding out in the gunner's seat," Tommy said patiently. Purpled scowled at him but didn't respond.

"I wasn't *bleeding out*," Tubbo said.

"Didn't Niki say you were...?" Ranboo asked carefully.

Lani nodded. "Yeah, we were there."

Tubbo scrunched his face at his sister. "You fucking suck."

"Oh, of *course* you don't yell at your *beloved*," Lani said. "Just your dear sister."

"We're husbands, and husbands don't argue," Tubbo announced.

"It was one mission!" Ranboo said disbelievingly. "We're divorced now!"

"I never consented to the divorce," Tubbo said.

"I never consented *to the marriage*."

"That's not the important part."

"Also, married couples *do* argue," Purpled cut in. "My mom and dad always did." He made a face. "Then, you know, they went off and fucking died, so..."

Tommy raised a hand. "That's a mood."

"You do realize that everyone in this shuttle has dead parents, right?" Ranboo pointed out.

"I don't," Drista said. "Mom and Dad are still alive."

"Isn't Dream your guardian, though?" Tommy asked.

"Yeah, they passed it off to him so he could sign off on some papers," Drista said dismissively. "They're...we have a struggling relationship. I don't see them very often."

"Did you see them on Terra?" Lani asked, seemingly interested.

"Nah," Drista said and leaned closer, smirking slightly. "They don't live on Terra. They're *spies*."

"Your parents are spies?" Tubbo yelped.

"Yeah, and they had Dream 'n me for two different cover-up missions," Drista said. "Never actually wanted children. So...I mean, they pushed for us to join the program young, but Dream got us out of there, and we joined the Galactic Rebellion—which is better than being a fuckin' barista, I suppose."

"You were a child spy?"

"Only for like two years, when I was seven," Drista said.

The entire group stared at her.

"Do—does anyone on the *L'manburg* know this?" Ranboo asked faintly.

"No," Drista said. "Well, Dream and Phil do. Most people know that Dream was a trained spy for five years. Never guessed his little sister knows how to use a sword and put together a gun in nine-point three seconds."

"Yeah, I never would have guessed either," Lani said with a scowl.

"That explains why you have good aim with the stupid felt ball gun," Tommy muttered. "Hold on, you can use a sword?"

"I can throw knives too," Drista said eloquently. "And, by the way, you can't tell anyone. Just because I'm a retired spy ain't mean anything about giving away secrets."

"So...Dream *did* give you knives?" Purpled asked.

"That's all you're taking away from this?" Lani said in a high-pitched voice.

"Of course I have weapons," Drista said. "I was taught to fire a phaser when I was eight." She patted her butterfly applique lace skirt, which really didn't make Tommy feel any better.

"I would have never guessed," Ranboo said genuinely.

"That's the point, innit?" Tommy pointed out.

"Tommy gets it," Drista said.

Tommy tilted his head at a small beep from his monitor. Turning back to the shuttle window, he saw the grey and red planet slowly coming into view. A small pale moon circled it, brighter than Luna of Terra of vibrant green rock.

Kinoko—and its moon, Shuru.

"It's very...interesting looking," Drista offered up.

"Its grass is like a purple-grey," Tubbo said. "Unlike grass, it has a different pigment than the grass on most other planets—Terra, for example, has chlorophyll, which most of the galaxy uses as a key compound for photosynthesis. Purple is usually caused by a different pigment called anthocyanin, which absorbs green and yellow light—means they're red or purple to most species' eyes." Tubbo tapped his eye helpfully.

"...most?" Ranboo prompted.

"Yeah, because Felines are colorblind, though they vary in type and deficiency," Tubbo said with a wide grin. "That's why George wears those stupid goggles all the time—most Felines wear contacts, though. Or they get surgery, but that's more expensive—that's why there's a lot of Felines

in the Galactic Rebellion recently, though! Dream, Sapnap, and George pushed for a law that would make it so if you were part of the Galactic Rebellion, you'd get the surgery for free!"

Tommy frowned. "I didn't know that."

"That's because Alyssa wasn't colorblind," Purpled told him. "She was like—one in a hundred thousand that was born with the extra cone in her eye."

"Oh," he said.

"I'm hungry," Tubbo said suddenly. "Boo, gimme food."

"*What?*" Ranboo said incredulously. "I don't just—have food on me!"

"Yeah, you do; I saw you put it in your pocket," Tubbo said with a scowl as everyone else in the shuttle rolled their eyes.

"Don't you have a banquet to eat?" Purpled asked Ranboo as the Enderian in question withdrew a granola bar of some sort and unwrapped it, handing half to a grabby Tubbo, who scarfed it down.

"Um, yeah," Ranboo said. "But you always gotta be prepared for...something to happen."

"Specifically a famine," Purpled said.

"Purpled, man!" Tommy said.

"What?"

He sighed and dismissed it. "Drista, can you open comms for broadcast?"

"Right," the Human said briskly, reaching over and flicking the switch.

Tommy put his hands back on the controls, turning off autopilot with a slight push of a button as he maneuvered the craft past Shuru, the green rock moon. Glancing down at the distance measurer, he noted that they were approximately three hundred and sixty thousand kilometers from the surface of Kinoko.

At three hundred and fifty thousand kilometers, the broadcasting signal flashed red, indicating that someone was contacting them.

› *Civilian craft, please state your name and designation as you enter Kinoko air space. This is the Ground Broadcasting Station.* ‹

Tommy reached over and pressed down on the speaker button. "This is CS-847, here for the Kinoko Galactic Ball. We're sending credentials now." He gave Drista a look, and his temp co-pilot dutifully sent over the documents—about half of them faked—to the Ground Broadcasting Station of Kinoko. Tommy gritted his teeth and prayed the documents that Harvey and Callahan had created would hold up. Obviously, it wouldn't be *hardly* scrutinized, as hundreds of ships probably arrived daily, and Callahan and Harvey probably knew what they were doing—that didn't make Tommy any less nervous.

› *Alright, CS-847, it seems your papers are in order. Please land in the Kinoko Kingdom, landing pad eighty-seven.* ‹

"Thanks," Tommy said a touch distractedly as he maneuvered the craft into the atmosphere and turned off the artificial gravity. Almost immediately, they could feel the pull, and Tubbo cursed slightly under his breath as his head hit the side of the ship.

"Fucking fly better!" the Shulker screeched.

"IT'S THE FUCKING GRAVITY, PRICK!" he yelled back.

› *Uh, CS-847? I think you forgot to turn off communications.* ‹

Cheeks flaming red, with Purpled howling in laughter, Tommy reached over and slammed the button for open comms off. "Shut up," he grumbled as he pulled the ship out of the dive just below the cloudline. Drista stood up slightly in her seat to peer into the shining city lights of the Kinoko Kingdom below—fortunately, while it was midday Terran time, it was about nine in the evening here. Drista, in all her knowledge, shoved a datapad in Tommy's face with the map of the kingdom and a giant red arrow at landing pad eighty-seven. Switching between looking out the window and following the air highways to looking at the datapad, Tommy finally managed to navigate to the landing pad, where he executed a perfect landing.

"Thank fuck you didn't crash," Purpled said faintly. "I guess *Chroma* taught you well." He spat that last line like an animal eating something distasteful.

"It was mostly Dream," Tommy said, ignoring the rising tension in the air as the rest of the passengers quietly unhooked their seat buckles.

"Great," Purpled said. "Remember the plan?"

"Yes, team leader," Tommy said, mock saluting him sharply.

"You've ruined your hair, Drista," Lani said in slight disgust as the Human in question rolled her eyes. "You have to look like you mean it, or they'll suspect something!"

"I'm just his plus one," Drista said. "In the invitation, anyway."

"Here, let me fix it," Lani said, summoning a small comb from wherever her dimensional storage was and forcing Drista to sit down. "You're so tall! Lean right."

"Maybe you're just short," Drista grumbled.

"Techno worked hard on that triple-braided updo," Lani said. "Look, I fixed it. It'll be fine." If Tommy was behind honest, he barely saw a difference, but he didn't voice it aloud.

Purpled, apparently, had different ideas. "Girls," he muttered.

Quick as a wink, Drista snatched the bone comb from Lani's hand and chucked it at Purpled's face. The magenta-eyed Human barely had time to fling himself to the side and into a roll before the comb hit the wall with a harsh *ping*, directly where his head had once been.

"Hey!"

"Don't patronize me," Drista said mockingly.

"Right," Purpled said, still glaring at Drista. "You three need to exit the ship first and meet your...escorts on the docking bay. We'll exit in about fifteen minutes and sneak into the castle. Tubbo?"

"Right," the Shulker said and manifested six small black casings, tossing them to each of the teens in the ship. Tommy caught his briskly and opened it, revealing a small clear and green chip and a piece of sticky strip—also green and clear. "Earpieces," Tubbo said after a moment. "Stick them in one of your ears—it should blend in; all three of you have long hair. Just don't pick at your ear." Tommy put it in and quickly found that the sticky strip was not unlike Elijah's microphone. He placed it over his Adam's apple and swallowed slightly, testing it. Beside him, Lani studied what he'd done and followed his lead.

"Remember the rings that Phil gave you before you left?" Tubbo asked.

"I thought that was a tracker," Tommy said, studying the golden jewelry on his right pointer finger. All six of them had identical ones.

"It is, but if you press the underside of it, it activates the microphone," Tubbo said. "Vurb and Finn engineered it with a bit of help from Harvey and me. That way, we're not an open mic."

"Gotcha," Drista said. Her voice echoed slightly as she tested it.

Tommy winced. "Yeah, that works." The six of them quickly went in a circle, checking that each of their pieces of tech worked.

"Remember," Purpled said as they finished. "Drista, you're Tommy and Ranboo's appointed child bodyguard and listed as Tommy's plus one—'cause they received invitations, and you didn't. What's your name, again?"

Drista rolled her eyes. "Drisianna, or Drisa. Hello? Child spy here. I *did* do some missions before Dream pulled us out."

Purpled grimaced. "Right, yeah. Tommy. Ranboo." Tommy snapped to attention. "Why are you here?"

"To spread awareness on survivor children," Ranboo replied with a slight grimace.

"And to increase our social standings," Tommy added.

"Right," Purpled said. "And where am I?"

"Sick," Ranboo said.

"With the flu," Tommy added. "That bitch."

"Wow, you really *can* follow orders," Purpled said in counterfeit surprise.

"Only from people I respect, o wise leader," he said sarcastically.

Purpled scowled. "Stop calling me that."

"Technically, you *are* mission leader," Drista said.

Purpled hissed something unpleasant through his teeth. "Whatever. Just fuckin'—distract them. Yeah. There's a banquet if you get hungry, don't worry—and *yes*, Tommy, they'll have vegetarian food," he said tiredly when Tommy opened his mouth. He promptly snapped it shut.

"If you get caught...?" Ranboo said.

"We won't," Purpled said, raising his chin. "Then we'll have a whole 'nother problem on our hands. Your rings will glow red if any one of us takes it off—only do that in emergencies, like if you get caught or someone corners you and tries to...y'know." He glanced at Drista meaningfully.

"I'd gut them," the girl said with a sniff.

"I get it, I get it," Purpled grumbled, raising a hand. He fell silent, making direct eye contact in the near-darkness with Tommy, magenta eyes meeting pale aqua. "Good luck."

"Oh, we have the easy part," Tommy scoffed. "*You* have the hard part."

"Crawling through vents?" Purpled said, raising an eyebrow. "More like a cowards' job."

"Oh, stop it," Drista said scathingly. "Tubbo needs to break into the security room and Lani into the Department of Information to download the information and the paper copy, and we're not sure if the blueprints are up-to-date because they're about thirty years old. That's why you're in the vents. You can't be seen anyway. Nobody is gonna look twice at Tubbo or Lani if they're acting normal."

Everyone gonna look at the kid that was on national television and has their fucking photo posted all over the history channels."

Purpled tilted his head. "Fair enough," he said eventually.

Tommy snorted loudly, punching Purpled in the arm. "You would think we're fully trained soldiers on a super-secret mission," he said. "In the end, we're just—what? Fourteen?" He glanced at Lani. "Fifteen?" Drista. "Seventeen, for the three of us. Eighteen nearly." That last one was Tubbo.

"I turn fifteen next week," Lani offered up.

Tommy looked at her. "You *do*?"

"Yeah, and I turn sixteen in a month and a half," Drista said.

He bit his lip. "Still teenagers, innit?"

"Traumatized Teenagers," Purpled replied.

"Funny," Tommy said. "Am I still the president?"

"You'll always be the president," Purpled said. "Until someone can somehow outdo the shit that is your life."

"I appreciate that," he said dryly. "Truly."

Purpled grinned at him. "Go on, Tommy," he said, reaching up and pushing the button that would open the door and lower the gangplank. "Good luck."

"Yes, mission leader," he said, offering his elbow to Drista, who scoffed slightly and took it, rolling her eyes as she lifted her skirt with her other hand, bunching it in a fist. Tommy could have sworn he saw the shadow of a holster through the gauze, but bit his tongue as Ranboo descended the gangplank next to him.

Despite how long they had taken in the shuttle, the landing dock mainly was empty, save for a trio of—Feline?—guards dressed in brown and red and white near a small skimmer that floated at the edge of the landing platform. They walked up to the trio—Purpled, Tubbo, and Lani remained hidden in the ship; the door closing behind Tommy—and one of them surveyed them quickly.

"Invitation?" he asked gruffly.

"Ah, I have them," Ranboo said, nervousness pouring through his voice. He fumbled in his pocket for his datapad, drawing up the two invitations and turning the datapad around to show the guard.

"What about her?" the guard asked, glancing at Drista, who, no longer in danger of falling from her heels, was glancing over at the city below the many landing pads that surrounded the central tower like branches on a tree.

"She's with me," Tommy said, flashing a bright smile before Drista could curse him out—or, worse, pull a weapon on him.

"She's your...?"

"Bodyguard," both of them said at once. Tommy scrunched his nose as Drista snorted.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'd never date someone like *you*."

"I'm almost offended," he grumbled back good-naturedly.

"Well," the guard said after a moment of silence, motioning at the two men behind him to put away their—buzz batons? Something like that. "It seems everything is in order. If you would just step

this way, gentleman. Lady." Drista nearly snorted again, her face contorting in mockery that could barely be seen in the darkness.

Tommy found it slightly funny that Ranboo towered over all three guards, despite probably being half as young as them—but Ranboo was an Enderian, no matter what happened to him or how many issues he biologically ever had.

The six of them climbed into the skimmer, Tommy valiantly wishing that he was the one flying the open-aired pod, though he wouldn't know how to drive it, and he had no idea where to go. Instead, he settled for peering over the shoulder of the guard and watching with slight awe as the Feline turned the knobs and the near-silent purr of the engine started up.

"Relax," Tommy told Drista, who was sitting in the center, her hands clutching at the seat in front of her. There were two guards in front of them, one in the pilot and the other in the co-piloting seat, and the last was in the third row behind them. "We're not going to fall."

"Sure we won't," Drista said, her face pale in the glittering light of a green moon.

"It could be worse," Ranboo said. "Tommy could be flying."

"I'm a very nice flier, thank you *very* much," he sniffed.

"Sure you are," Ranboo said.

Tommy was about to rant about the fact that he had taken his lessons, yet couldn't get his permit because he had to get another mentor, but then bit his tongue. There were people around them—his papers that he'd forwarded to the Ground Broadcasting Station had a false license on it. That would surely give him away. If the pinch on his arm meant anything, it was that Drista had nearly caught what he was going to say.

"I'm a good pilot," he grumbled, slouching further in the padded seat as the wind swept through his hair. Drista had a hand up, blocking the draft, probably knowing that Lani would rain hell down upon her if her strands were an inch out of place. "I'm a *good* pilot."

"I'm sure you are," Drista said pityingly, patting his knee with her free hand that she wasn't using to shield her head.

"I don't want your fuckin' pity pats," he snarled at her, and Drista rolled her eyes.

"Classic Tommy," she mocked and then nearly screeched as the skimmer began to descend towards the massive glowing—stone?—walls of the Kinoko Kingdom's castle.

Tommy nearly stood up to look at it, mouth gaping slightly at the paved roofs akin to the spotted red mushrooms occasionally found on Terra—

"—*Amanita muscaria*," Ranboo said when Tommy opened his mouth to ask what type it was. "What? I *do* have a hu—friend that rants about random things. Daily." The Enderian had to raise his voice slightly to be heard over the roar of the wind.

"It's beautiful," Tommy whispered. "I've never seen anything like this before."

"There isn't anything like this," the guard who was piloting the craft said proudly as he leveled out, much to Drista's relief. "It's one of a kind."

"I can see that," Tommy said faintly, standing up fully. Drista hissed and grabbed at his ankle.

"For fucks' sake—" she started.

"You should probably sit down, sir," the guard behind them warned.

"Where are we landing?" he asked, ignoring both of them.

"Uh, right there," the guard that was piloting the craft said, pointing down at a stretch of grass before the castle gates. If Tommy squinted, he could see other small crafts identical to this one, probably coming from the other landing platforms.

"Don't you dare," Drista hissed.

"Don't rip your uniform," Ranboo sighed, mostly resigned.

"Race you to the bottom!" he screeched happily, tugging himself out of Drista's grip and rocking the skimmer slightly as he leaped on the side of the slowly descending craft.

"What are you—" the third guard said, a touch nervously.

Tommy laughed giddily, and jumped off the edge of the skimmer.

"Oh my God!" one of the guards cried out.

"He's fine," Ranboo said dismissively, glancing over the side of the skimmer at the quickly-falling Avian. Drista grumbled something distasteful under her breath and rolled her eyes. "He's an Avian, remember?"

"I don't know anything about Avians," the guard admitted. "Is he—floating?" There was a note of horrified interest in his voice.

"Gliding," Ranboo corrected, a small smile filling his face as he watched his friend slowfall towards the ground, already hundreds of yards below. "He'll be fine."

He'll be fine.

The Dance, the Song, the Vents

Hidden talent is not yet

a reputation.

- Unknown

Tommy touched down on the grass with barely a whisper, smirking into the air as he stepped aside and ignored the other teenagers and guards that were staring at him in near-disbelief. He glanced up and waited for about a minute and a half as the skimmer descended.

He wouldn't admit he was slightly out of breath. He *had* fallen about six hundred yards, four hundred of them being complete freefall.

When the skimmer was five feet from the ground, Drista hopped out, bunching her sage green skirts in her hand, so they didn't billow out, and dropped next to Tommy on the grass.

"Show off," she grumbled, punching him in the shoulder.

"That's my middle name," he said with a grin.

"I thought it was Kraken," Ranboo announced, stepping off the side of the skimmer after it actually had landed. "And Danger. And Careful."

"Right," Tommy said unblinkingly. "Tommy Careful Kraken Danger Innes. That's me."

"That's one hell of a stunt you pulled, kid," the pilot who was driving the skimmer called out to Tommy, his slitted eyes slightly blown wide. "That what Avians can do?"

He swallowed slightly, thinking of the few that were left of them. "Some of them," he said. "Me, really."

"I would have liked to have met them, if they're all as intrepid as you," the pilot said, tipping his hat. "Good luck at the dance."

"Thanks," Tommy said.

He almost felt bad for stealing from them but shrugged it off as Ranboo pointed towards the gates, where a duo, a man and a woman—the male Human-passing and the female Elytrian were dressed, both in red and white suits, checking invitations. Tommy, Drista, and Ranboo joined the line of other teens—most of whom, he noted with pride, were shorter than him.

A few gave him looks. Some recognized him, looking between him and Ranboo with open mouths. Others were merely—judging. As if he would be a threat to whatever political game was about to happen that night.

"Tommy Innes and Ranboo," he heard, once, stiffening slightly. Ranboo, on his left, nudged him slightly until he relaxed. They had given a live interview. Which had promptly blown up, and, according to Lani, who was the honorary social media teen—been trending on different socials for about three days.

Not many teens were famous, after all. *Galaxy* famous.

He didn't even know why. Perhaps it was because all of this was like some sort of book—rebellion and death and fire and blood. This wasn't some pretty prince of some planet; these had been the deaths of children from every race—save the Arachnids, of course—and it had been a blow to the inside.

Thousands dead. Right under the noses of the Galactic Rebellion. A teaching moment that, to Tommy's knowledge, hadn't happened since. They had people sent to each outpost, neutral or not, monthly, and access to live video footage of the outskirts. No more private institutions, no more genocides like this.

At least the galaxy had learned something, even if it had been born from pain. At least they had pushed—and made—change.

When they reached the front of the line, and were nearly into the gardens of the Kinoko castle, the man and the woman introduced themselves to be Calvin—a dark-skinned black-haired *Shulker* male, now that Tommy could recognize the ease of which he dismissed something into midair—and K'thr'yn—pronounced like Kathryn, but twisting the name slightly.

"Invitations, please?" K'thr'yn said, smiling slightly at the three of them. If she recognized them, she didn't show it. Her accent mirrored Phil and Hannah's, though hers was more like Sniff's parents—thicker and more noticeable.

"Here," Ranboo said, pulling out his datapad and handing it to Calvin, who had his hand out. "You're a Shulker," he added after a moment.

"How did you...?" Calvin said, looking a bit like a startled deer as he looked up.

"Ranboo," K'thr'yn murmured under her breath, without even glancing at the invitations. So she *did* recognize them. Or, at least, Tommy and Ranboo. "Junior nurse aboard the *L'manburg*."

Ranboo blinked slightly, mouth opening and closing. "Ah. Yes. It's shore leave, so I thought...uh, we thought. You know. Invitations..."

"No, no, I get it," K'thr'yn said, waving a hand.

"Oh!" Calvin said as he scrolled down to Tommy's invitation. "That's how you knew I was a Shulker! You have the sister and brother team aboard your ship!"

"...huh?" Tommy asked stupidly.

Calvin smiled. "When Shulkers are rare—I mean, obviously not as rare as *you*, Avians and all that—but rare enough, you do keep track of those in positions of power. To—Tubbo? Was it?" Ranboo nodded. "He graduated early, and it was all over the school headlines. Since he's a Shulker, our

people tend to notice and cheer him on. And then, of course, his parents..." Calvin trailed off, losing that smile. "...well, they were a sad loss. Again, when you number under ten thousand in a wide galaxy, you do tend to get notice of these things. So when his sister joined the crew too, I did keep track of that."

"He'll be sorry he didn't come as my escort, then," Ranboo said with a blinding but nervous smile. Tommy was all-too-aware of the three people that were probably trying to sneak into the castle as they spoke.

"I would have liked to meet him," Calvin said. "He seems like a brilliant kid." The Shulker turned to Drista. "And you are...?"

"Drisianna," Drista said.

"Drisa," Tommy said at the same time. Ranboo winced. Calvin raised an eyebrow.

Drista scowled, annoyed. "I said my *friends* called me Drisa, not that *you* can." Her hands were noticeably white in her skirts as she argued to fix Tommy's slip-up.

"Hey!" he said, raising his hands in mock surrender, and pretending a line of cold sweat hadn't suddenly appeared on his neck. "Aren't we friends?"

"No, I hate you," she deadpanned, turning back to Calvin and K'thr'yn, who were both tamping down on smiles. "I'm their bodyguard. Unfortunately. Captain Philza of the *L'manburg* put me in place—I'm his friends' daughter." Enough half-truths for it to be realistic.

"Aren't you a kid?" Calvin asked.

"That's the point, isn't it?" Drista asked dryly.

"Fair enough," Calvin said, stepping aside. "Welcome to the Kinoko Kingdom."

The ballroom was beautiful.

Painted white and golden-beige—almost like caramel, Tommy stared up in awe at the muraled ceilings that depicted figures, both young and old, dancing amidst a feast in front of a cerulean sea. Glass chandeliers that reminded him of Terran Victorian times hung from the ceilings on tiny chains that looked too thin to hold the weight—but would, because of modernized technology. Tables three of four walls, covered in elegant tablecloths and bearing golden candlesticks and gold-leaf chairs.

Techno would have a field day with this, he realized.

The eastern side of the ballroom was covered in floor-to-ceiling windows and heavy drapes that were made of some thick, velvety fabric. The floor was marble, and even through Tommy's light boots, he could feel the heat of warming tech beneath the excellent stone. The small trickling of music from a corner band drifted above their heads—Tommy could hear the notes of a harp, a piano, and a violin, plus instruments that he didn't recognize.

"Wow," Drista whispered, and Tommy felt ugly in the golden warmth. People trickled by the three of them, not even pausing to glance around at the epicness that surrounded everyone—clearly, they were used to it, or had been here before.

"Man," Ranboo said. "Eat the rich, am I right?"

Drista hissed, reaching up to clap a hand over the Enderian's mouth. "Don't *say* that around here," she said, leading them over to a corner table that was near a mouth-watering banquet of delicious goods from all cultures. Tommy even recognized some Terran and Elytrian ones.

"I don't understand why we have to be here," Tommy grumbled, slouching slightly in his chair until Drista kicked his feet and he straightened his posture with a sigh.

"You two are ridiculous," the Human scoffed. "Clearly, we're back up."

"...huh?" Ranboo and Tommy said at the same time.

Drista waved a hand. "If Purpled, Lani, and Tubbo fail—I'm not *saying* they will, just *if*—then we're here to pull them out and slash or complete the mission." She shrugged. "Tubbo is the tech guy, Lani is a Shulker, and Purpled really didn't want to be here, which is why the three of us is backup." She paused. "Oh, and Tommy, you're a pilot, so obviously, they don't want you on the first line of fire. If you get shot, we're gonna have a hard time getting off the planet."

"I'm sure you could fly," he said.

Drista shrugged. "Probably."

"Excuse me, miss?"

Tommy, Ranboo, and Drista all turned towards the voice of a young girl—maybe fifteen or sixteen—in a sky blue princess-trained strapless dress. She had dark blue hair that looked oddly natural, and shifting slightly nervous sky-blue eyes. A blue-painted tube ran out of her nose and over her left ear, down under her armpit into her dress.

Merling, Tommy's mind said. His heart panged as his mind went first to Liz, the Merling that had died. He bit his lip and blinked back the tears. No, he would not cry. Not here.

"Yes?" Drista said, not unkindly.

"Um, sorry to bother you..." the girl said. "My parents want me to dance with someone, and I don't want to dance with guys." She cringed as Tommy raised an eyebrow. "N-no offense. I just. Would rather dance with girls. They're pretty."

"Amen to that one," Tommy said, reaching over and raising a glass of water. Drista turned her head and scowled at him. "What? She's not wrong."

"A-anyway," the Merling girl said, stuttering slightly as she reached up and played with a bit of her hair. "I don't recognize you, which means when you leave, my parents won't chase you down to try to get me married to you." She made a face. "Which. I suppose is good."

"So," Drista said. "Let me get this straight. You like girls, and your parents asked you to dance with someone, so you picked me because you have no idea who I am, and I can leave?"

"Yeah, and you're not my type at all," the girl said. "S-sorry. I have a...uh...nevermind. They're...not here." She was clearly uncomfortable with that fact.

"No, that's fine," Drista said. "Just a dance, then?"

"Yeah, just a dance," the Merling said, clearly slightly relieved. "Sorry for the trouble."

"No, please," Drista said, standing up eloquently. Her sage green dress glimmered in the candlelight. "I love pissing off parents."

"I never said that," the Merling blinked.

"Ah, but it was implied," Drista said with a smirk. "What's your name?"

"P'chu," the girl said.

"Nice to meet you," Drista said. "I'm Drisianna, but my friends call me Drisa. You can call me Drisa."

Tommy watched as the two girls—now acquaintances, he supposed—walked off to join other friends and couples dancing. Some of them clearly were friends, giggling as they joked around holding hands, while others, the softer ones with love on their faces, were together as a romantic pair.

"Well," Ranboo said. "Let's hope they don't become best friends. I *do* not want a Drista two-point-oh harping on me." He shuddered. "One is enough."

"Well," Tommy said. "Now that the menace is gone, let's get some food." he shrugged. "I mean, we might be...you know. But I'm hungry, and I think I see some Avian plates."

Ranboo swung his head to peer over the tables and other teens. "Really?"

"Maybe," Tommy said, standing up and brushing his uniform slightly. Ranboo followed him as the two began to navigate their way through the small crowd, catching snippets of conversations.

"Two *girls*—"

"—my mother says—"

"—guy from Elytra with *red* wings—"

"Did you hear about—"

"—*Mira* is back in commission!"

Tommy *almost* turned to look at the two boys with some sort of sparkly drinks in their hands who were talking about the *Mira*. He gritted his teeth and forged his way through to the banquet, where he grabbed two silver-rimmed plates and handed one to Ranboo, walking instantly to the buttered bread and skipping the plate of meat entirely.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked Ranboo, pointing to a blue-leafy salad with red and orange fruit and green sauce on it, clearly labeled *vegetarian*. At least they had labels.

"Uh," Ranboo said, looking like a deer caught in headlights from where he was pouring an Enderian drink into a glass cup. "It looks. Sort of like a Feline plant. But those yellow chamasly are Blazeborn—uh. I dunno."

Tommy shrugged. "Well, it couldn't hurt."

"Actually—"

It was spicy. Which was odd for a salad, but Tommy coughed slightly and poured himself some type of yellow sour and sweet drink that washed it right away. Once the surprise of the initial spiciness went away, it was pretty good. Tommy loaded up the plate with other random salads next to his brown bread and some roast mushroom gnocchi, which was a Terran vegetarian dish.

He paused by an Avian-like dish with a dry mouth—and not because he hadn't drunk anything in a while, if anything, the glass in his hand was half-empty—and stared at it.

"What's happening—oh," Ranboo said, pausing by his side. He had an assortment of chorus fruit and other breaded goods—as well a raspberry tart—on his plate. "Is it good?"

"I think it was," he said finally. "The stupid part is I don't remember eating it. I just remember Dad—Sam making it." When he blinked his eyes, he could almost picture his father shooing the chefs out of the kitchen and little Tommy sitting on the counter watching the Avian bustle around the kitchen with Avian plants and ingredients.

"Do you want...?" Ranboo said, motioning to it.

"No," Tommy said, turning away. "I don't want to ruin the memories."

"Okay," Ranboo said. "That's okay."

Near-silently, the two of them walk back to the table, and Tommy dug into his food with only a slight bit reserve—that fall had made him pretty hungry, after all.

"Oh my goodness," Drista said, and Tommy glanced up, cheeks stuffed like a hamster, to see the disappointed red-faced Human girl staring down at both of them. She had her heels in her hand, and plopped them down on the empty seat.

"Why're your shoes off?" he said with his mouth full, swallowing it all in one gulp.

Drista wrinkled her nose at him. "Gross," she said. "Don't talk with your mouth full." He flipped her off smoothly. "My feet hurt. From dancing with P'chu."

"Where is she?" Ranboo asked, glancing around nervously—as if Drista had dragged her off into a corner and murdered her.

"Her parents called her," Drista shrugged. "We exchanged datapad information. She's pretty cool."

"Please don't gaslight her into bullying me," Ranboo said warily.

"Gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss."

Tommy stabbed his spork in her direction. "*Never* say that again."

Drista squinted at his hand. "Is that a *spork*?"

"It's universally cool!"

"It's universally for losers," Drista said.

› Houston, we have a problem. ‹

Tommy froze, making eye contact with Drista and Ranboo.

› Now isn't time for your stupid references! Tommy. Drista. Ranboo. Tubbo has been trying to loop the cameras, but people keep walking through the doors to sneak off and—*you know*. You have to stop them from leaving for about three and a half minutes so we can put the loop in place. Lani needs to walk across that hallway, and we can't have them tracking us. ‹

Tommy watched as Drista touched her finger to her ring, almost absently as she leaned forward. "We can do it," she said.

"We can?" Tommy asked.

› Good. Thank you. Don't commit any war crimes. ‹

"Don't worry," Drista said. "We got this."

"We do?" Tommy asked.

"Yeah," Drista said. "I got a plan. Ranboo."

"Huh?" the Enderian asked, blinking at her.

"Remember like a year and a half ago when you and Tubbo made that weird-ass dance for your fake wedding that mesmerized everyone and was really cool?" Tommy frowned, not entirely understanding her train of thought.

"Ah. Yeah, maybe," Ranboo said. "Why?"

"I need you to repeat that performance," Drista said. "But with Tommy instead of Tubbo."

"What?" he said, reeling back. "I'm not dancing—I don't know how to fucking dance!"

"Yeah, trust me, neither did Tubbo," Drista said dryly. "But while you can play the violin, Ranboo can dance."

"I do know that," he admitted. "There were lessons on Pogtopia. I always thought they were useless."

"I created it," Ranboo admitted. "It's—uh, I might pass out afterward, because it's...unique." He scratched the back of his head. "I use my teleportation powers."

Tommy felt his jaw drop. "For a *dance*?"

"Hey!" Ranboo said. "It was another distraction thing, just like this." He glanced at Drista. "But, uh. I can only do it with...that song."

"Don't worry," Drista said. "I got that covered."

"What are you guys *talking* about?" Tommy demanded. "I don't know how to fucking dance!"

"It's fine," Ranboo said dismissively. "I literally do all the work. All you have to do is follow my lead."

"Whatever you say, Ranboob," he grumbled under his breath.

"Great," the Enderian said. "Take off your blazer."

"What?"

"It's easier to dance if you can actually lift your arms more than directly horizontal to the ground," Ranboo said. Tommy grumbled but complied, revealing a dark red dress shirt below. Ranboo did the same, though his dress shirt was white instead of red. Drista had already stood up and stalked off into the crowd, and Tommy bit his tongue down from asking where she was going.

"We're gonna fail," Tommy said.

"No, we're not," Ranboo said, grabbing his hand as Tommy complained about how cold it was. "Just don't step on my toes."

"That's harder than you think, Ranboob. You have massive toes."

"I didn't know you studied my toes so studiously."

"Shut the fuck up, you prick."

As they stepped onto the dance floor, clearly drawing attention to themselves, people began to recognize—first Ranboo—and then Tommy. Whispers began to arise around them as the music was cut off suddenly. The various couples and friend groups that were already dancing stopped and turned towards the music group, who had been stopped by none other than Drista, the Human girl pointing towards Ranboo and Tommy and gesturing furiously. Tommy flushed silently under the limelight, slightly embarrassed at all the staring from kids *literally his age*.

"...survivors of the Children's Rebellion..."

"That's *Tommy Innes*—"

"—Ranboo, the albino Enderian guy—"

"What are they doing *here*?"

"Duh, obviously they're here to find partners—"

"No, no, Ranboo is holding Tommy's hand, clearly—"

› EXCUSE THEM? ‹

› Tubbo, SHUT UP. ‹

› TOMMY IS STEALING MY HUSBAND! ‹

› They're literally just dancing. ‹

› Tubbo, stop paying attention to what the crowd is saying and pay more attention to uploading the video loop. Thank you. ‹

Tommy touched his finger to his ring and hissed, "Shut the *fuck* up," already wincing slightly from the surprise that had come from the fucking Shulker hollering in his eardrums.

"Let them think," Ranboo said softly. "It's just another distraction. What matters is what we know."

"Tubbo's gonna be mad," he said.

"Tubbo is already mad."

Tommy winced again as he heard the loud crackling of a microphone and looked over to see Drista and a tired-looking band behind her—clearly, she'd bullied her way into using the microphone.

"What's her plan?"

"If you can play an instrument, and I can dance, then Drista can sing," Ranboo answered.

"Really?"

"Yeah," Ranboo said. "I guess we all cope being child soldiers differently."

Tommy opened his mouth to tell the Enderian that he was not a child soldier, *thank you very much*, but from the wry look that was thrown his way, Ranboo clearly had guessed what Tommy had about Pogtopia and the school and Chroma.

"Who the fuck is she?" Tommy heard an Elytrian boy mutter under his breath as the crowd stared at Drista.

"Come on," Ranboo hissed, dragging him onto the middle of the dance floor.

"Right!" Drista shouted into the microphone. "Yeah, yeah, you'll be back to your regularly scheduled program in a minute," she added, waving off the annoyed looks. "However! We have two extraordinary guests who will be performing a custom piece of work for us, so let's pay attention to that."

Tommy swallowed, praying that this didn't seem too random. Honestly, he'd rather that Drista pulled a gun and held everyone captive. That would have been far less demeaning. Maybe a bit more war crimes, but unquestionably less demeaning.

Drista turned her head slightly and tilted it, and the group of musicians behind her took that as a sign to begin playing...some song that Tommy didn't recognize.

Ranboo tapped his shoulder, and Tommy realized that it was just them on the dance floor, now, as the notes trickled through the air and he let out a breath as Ranboo took his hands, smiling at him.

God, this was going to spread so many rumors. He doubted he would get any women now!

*"Step one, you say we need to talk
He walks, you say sit down, it's just a talk
He smiles politely back at you
You stare politely right on through..."*

Drista's voice surprised Tommy so much he nearly stumbled, eyes widening slightly as the Human girl began to sing. It was...sweet, though the song itself sounded bittersweet and sad. Clearly, it was a Terran song, though how old, he had no idea.

*"Some sort of window to your right
As he goes left, and you stay right
Between the lines of fear and blame
You begin to wonder why you came..."*

Tommy didn't know how to dance, but he didn't have to. Ranboo's hands were cold on his as they moved, and all he had to do was drift away and make his feet lighter to follow the movements of the Enderian. It made him feel near graceful as he felt and watched Ranboo disappear in front of him, appearing behind in a blink of purple particles and murmurs from the watching crowd.

He could almost get used to this.

*"Where did I go wrong?
I lost a friend*

*Somewhere along in the bitterness
And I would have stayed up with you all night
Had I known how to save a life."*

His legs hurt. Drista's voice danced through his ears, and Tommy gritted his teeth and put a hand on Ranboo's waist where the Enderian directed him to.

He reminded himself that Purpled was crouched in dusty vents somewhere, up above—perhaps he was listening. Tubbo definitely was, through cameras or speakers or whatever. He wondered what this looked like from the spectators. It had to be cool enough. Everyone was silent, and Tommy's vision was full of purple particles as he jumped up at Ranboo's silent go-ahead, and the Enderian teleported above him. Tommy barely managed to catch them both, and they floated down to the floor, leaving Tommy in breathy pants as he gasped for some air.

*"Let him know that you know best
'Cause after all, you do know best
Try to slip past his defense
Without granting innocence..."*

He felt slightly dizzy and nauseous because he was using his Avian biochemistry to be able to glide through the air and land quieter on his feet. And catch Ranboo.

There was no way that Ranboo wasn't, like, taking professional lessons every week. Not that Tommy knew much about Ranboo's personal life, as he tended to—mostly accidentally—ignore the Enderian. He was getting better, though.

Maybe they should become professional dancers. And by they, he meant Ranboo. The only reason that he hadn't stumbled—actually, he had, and had made it look like some sort of graceful turn-and-fall, Ranboo catching him at the last minute and making it look like an epic catch—was because he was an Avian.

*"Lay down a list of what is wrong
The things you've told him all along
And pray to God he hears you
And I pray to God he hears you..."*

This reminded him of Pogtopia. The silence, the stillness in the air. The music in the background—the voice of a young but beautifully sounding singer. A smile on his face and with a friend that he had known and lost and known again. Learning something through demonstration, cold hands on his wrists as he was pulled and tested and watched with bated breath for something to go wrong.

It reminded him of the better days of Pogtopia.

*"And where did I go wrong?
I lost a friend
Somewhere along in the bitterness
And I would have stayed up with you all night
Had I known how to save a life..."*

It reminded him of home.

Before everything went horribly wrong.



Arachnophobia

Chapter Notes

Junior year of high school has been kicking my ass (yes I'm a child, I get it) + a writer's block, so sorry for the sporadic updates as of late

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Only the wisest and stupidest

of men never change.

- Confucious

› *We got the folders.* ‹

"Good," Drista said, as Tommy was half-asleep, his head on the tablecloths. "I think Tommy's about to pass out too."

› *What?! Is he okay?* ‹

"M fine," he grumbled into his microphone. "Jus' tired."

"Yeah, he and Ranboo tired themselves out dancing," Drista said, both of them glancing at Ranboo, who was already asleep. Fortunately, that fact and Drista's heavy glares were enough to keep people away from them.

› *That's what you get for using your abilities.* ‹

"They're mine to use," he said grumpily.

"Don't fall asleep while piloting," Drista said, pushing a mug of something towards Tommy's hands. He yawned and sniffed at it suspiciously. "It's not poison. Knifing someone is so much cooler than poison."

"I didn't think it was," he said, taking a sip and nearly dying at its bitterness. "WHAT the *fuck* is that?"

"Pure caffeine," Drista said. "It'll wake you up in about ten minutes."

Tommy glared at her and reached over to a small basket, tearing open a biodegradable packet of sugar and pouring it into the profound brown awfulness. After a second, he added a second. A third. A fourth.

"Oh, stop being dramatic," Drista said. She tilted her head. "It's too bad they have a planetwide jammer here. Otherwise, I'd message Wilbur to complain about you."

"Doesn't Tubbo have a jammer?" Tommy asked.

"Yeah, but it's off at the minute," Drista said, waving a hand. "It'd be awfully awkward if there were a small bubble of nothing wherever he walked, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose," he said, blinking slightly as he downed the rest of the pure caffeine with a grimace. He should add milk next time. Or something to dilute it. Maybe poison. Poison probably tasted better than *pure caffeine*.

› *Come on, guys, let's get out of here.* ‹

"Gotcha, mission leader," Tommy said.

› *Don't call me that.* ‹

"I would never, mission leader."

Drista sighed and poked Ranboo's side as she looked at Tommy. "Don't antagonize him."

Tommy frowned. "He deserves it."

"He's gonna fill your bed with snakes or some shit," Drista warned him as she poked Ranboo's head again. "Hey. Sleepyhead. Dancer boy. Beloved. Get up."

"Don' call me that," Ranboo slurred as he blinked his heterochromatic eyes sleepily. "Wha's goin' on?"

"We're leaving," Drista said. "It's nearly eleven Standard time. The crew's going to rain down hell if we don't get back before twelve."

"Oh," Ranboo said. "How long was I asleep?"

"About half an hour," Drista said with a shrug. "Tommy was mostly snoozing too. I warded off your well-wishers. Nice job, by the way."

"Nice singing," Tommy said, standing up. "I have to go to the bathroom. I'll meet you outside."

Drista barely spared him a second glance as she held out a hand, and Ranboo took it, hauling the much taller boy up. "Okay."

Tommy navigated his way through the dispersing crowd, ducking his head when people called his name. He didn't want to have to deal with that at the minute. He opened the doors with a slight push, staring at the designs of mushrooms inscribed in them before passing through into the hallway. The music cut off almost instantly, and Tommy breathed in the silence that followed, the clear electrical lights of the hallway a nice break from the flickering candlelight.

It was quiet.

Tommy wondered if Lani had passed this way as he took a left turn towards where one of the guests had also gone to use the faculties.

He used the lavatory without a problem, washing his hands and staring into the clear mirror for a second. His eyes had fewer bags than usual under them, and his hair, while slightly out of place from a night of dancing with Ranboob, was longer. His eyes were a deep cerulean blue, and the gauntness had near-vanished from his features.

Tommy grinned at himself in the mirror, proud of whom he'd become. He left the bathroom at a brisk walk, sure that if he took too long, his teammates would converge upon his tracker's position.

About a hundred yards from the double doors—he was taking a different path out of the castle, as he didn't want any incessant questions or annoyances on his way out—Tommy heard a tiny *plink* from a slightly ajar doorway. He paused in his steps, glad that his light boots masked his steps slightly as he crept towards it.

It was probably a server. A busboy. A drunk person. Gods, he hoped it wasn't two people doing the horizontal tango. That would be fucking *awkward*. His hand suddenly had his pink knife in it, and Tommy swallowed, wondering if he should just walk past it.

Another *plink*. A rolling of a file cabinet.

Tommy opened the door slowly, one hand wrapping around the inside. Fortunately, the hinges were oiled because it didn't make a single squeak as it opened into an apparent office, complete with a stamp set on the table and a letter opener.

A man was going through the files in the back, his deep brown hair curling towards his neck. He wore an orange shirt and long black pants.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Tommy said, raising his knife higher.

The man spun around, his reddish-brown eyes going wide, and Tommy stared face-to-face at an Arachnid.

He yelped, scrambling back as the man vaulted over the desk and made a terrible stab attempt at the Arachnid's gut, missing and nearly stumbling. A hand grabbed his wrist, and then the other, and Tommy nearly shrieked as copious amounts of webbing wrapped tightly around them. He couldn't contact them. He couldn't contact them.

"Wait, wait," the Arachnid said. "Please don't stab me."

Tommy paused in his struggling as the Arachnid backed away from him, eyes still wide and hands up. He had mandibles poking out of his lower lip, almost like Technoblade—*no*, Arachnids were nothing like Technoblade. The two couldn't even compare.

"Please," the Arachnid said. "I've heard of you. You're Tommy, right?"

"What's it to you, prick?" he snarled, placing his bound hands in between his legs and kicking at it with the bottom of his boot. He didn't succeed, and the Arachnid didn't move towards him to

restrain him further, either.

"My name is Deo," the Arachnid said. "And you have to believe me. I'm not here to hurt you or your friends. I've seen you on the broadcasts."

"Well, I *don't* believe you, you fucker," he snapped. "Your people killed my parents!"

"And your parents killed mine!" Deo snapped back, eyes flashing slightly. He cringed directly after that. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped."

Now Tommy *was* deeply in shock, jaw dropping slightly. Had an Arachnid just *apologized* to him? "What?" he asked faintly.

"The Arachnids aren't all evil," Deo said firmly as if he'd practiced this speech. "Please. I'm on your side. All I'm looking for is the Artifact."

"I get it," he said. "You think we stole it—"

"You didn't?" Deo asked.

"No," Tommy said. "It was an accusation."

"That's not what we were taught," Deo said, looking troubled.

"This is not what we were taught either," Tommy admitted.

"Your father was close to finding it, you know," Deo said. "He had contacts—"

"Sam would *never* work with Arachnids!" Tommy seethed, his knuckles turning white with ire.

"How do you know?" Deo asked quietly. He reached for the desk and pulled out a file. "I brought this here. It's a transcript from a letter your father wrote to our leader." He hesitated. "It's basically a civil war, you know. Our side is split in half. Half of them support me—or, well, I support them. I'm no leader. The other half support fighting the Galactic Rebellion, 'cause they think the Artifact was stolen." Deo paused. "Oh, yeah, and a small percentage of them support Chroma. Like Merikh Rience, if you've ever heard of him."

"He's a war prisoner," Tommy said stiffly. "He murdered my parents seven years ago."

"That's good," Deo said awkwardly, though surprised.

"I didn't think you were on Chroma's side," Tommy said. "Your people weren't in Pogtopia." It was hard to get over the seething rage in him. It was hard to feel anything but contempt for the Arachnid. It was hard to *believe* him.

Deo reached down and picked up the knife that Tommy had dropped, and Tommy went white, going back to struggling with his bonds. The Arachnid sighed and walked over to him.

"Get away from me!" Tommy shrieked, kicking at him with his legs.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Deo said in annoyance. "Why the hell would I be telling you these things just to hurt you?"

"I dunno, you could be a wrong'un," Tommy said as he bit and kicked at Deo.

"OW! You stupid raccoon!"

"Don't call me a raccoon!"

Suddenly his hands were free, and Tommy stared at them in surprise. Deo had cut through the bonds on his wrists with the knife, and was now proffering it, hilt first.

"Come on," the Arachnid said. "Let's try to have some peace."

Tommy hissed untrustingly. "Your people have murdered my people."

"Maybe," Deo said. "But yours have killed mine too." He shrugged. "I've never killed any members of the Galactic Rebellion, but I have it on good word that you killed Merikh Rience's crew."

Tommy swallowed as he grabbed the knife from Deo's hands, holding it up shakily as if it'd been cursed. "Why—why are you doing this?" he asked finally.

"Because I, among many, believe in peace," Deo said. "I'm done with war. My parents were done with war. I'm tired of being blamed for a crime I didn't do. And now I'm tired of blaming people for a crime they didn't do."

"Yeah, I feel you," Tommy muttered. "No, wait, hang on, I shouldn't be feeling bad for you. Fuck you!"

"...okay," Deo said. "Don't you want this war over and done with too?"

"Yeah," Tommy said.

Deo grabbed another file and proffered it to Tommy, who reached out and snatched it quickly. The Arachnid raised an eyebrow.

"Fuck you, bitch."

"That folder contains information on coordinates," Deo said. "I found it here." He gestured at the file cabinet. "Unfortunately, it's coded. And we don't know the cipher. It's a custom code, too. Nothing that the galaxy knows." He shrugged. "Your dad had to have gotten it out. He was looking for the Artifact; he had to have gotten the cipher out."

All of a sudden, it clicked so fast that Tommy felt dizzy. The code that Puffy had given him last minute, the desperation in her voice. The reasoning that he could never tell anyone.

His family had been working with Arachnids.

His family was evil.

Wait, no. Deo said that only about half of the Arachnids actually fought the Galactic Rebellion. The other half wanted the war done with.

Tommy had the code.

Tommy had the fucking code to the cipher, and he'd been carrying it for seven years.

"Do you know if some sort of black box escaped?" Deo asked him intently. "Or if he sent a message to someone last minute? He *had* to have sent the cipher out *somewhere*..."

And Tommy opened his mouth and lied as he clutched the folder in his hands. "No," he said.

Because he couldn't believe that the best years of his life had been a lie.

But Sam was his father, and Sam was *good*, and Puffy was good, and Clara had been good...maybe the Arachnids weren't so bad?

No, the Arachnids murdered his parents.

But Deo said—

Deo tugged the folder out of Tommy's hands, frowning at him as Tommy fought an internal war.

› *Tommy? You're taking an awfully long time.* ‹

"Gotta go," he croaked out. "I'm fine," he choked out next, tapping his ring. "Feeling ill and threw up in the bathroom."

"The Arachnids aren't all bad," Deo said, watching him through his brown-red eyes as he left. "Trust me."

"I don't," he said, and left.

But he had a cipher with no code, and Deo had a code with no cipher. It added up, and nobody knew that Tommy had a key memorized. He'd told no one. Nobody knew.

It made sense.

Everything was slowly starting to make sense, and Tommy hated every moment of it.

"We'd thought you'd been kidnapped or something," Purpled joked as Tommy jogged his way onto the ship. Tubbo and Ranboo looked relieved.

"Nah," he said, still feeling slightly unsettled. "Nobody can kidnap me."

"I sincerely doubt *that*," Drista said. "Come on, flier boy. Fly us out of here."

"Real original," he snorted, sitting down and pretending that his entire world hadn't been shaken on its axis. Tommy cracked his knuckles and turned on the engine with a quick thumbprint scan.

"You must've walked through spiderweb," Drista said, and Tommy jerked to the side off the edge of the landing platform, just barely catching himself and forcing the nose of the ship upwards. "HEY! What the fuck was that?"

"Sorry," he said. "Arachnophobia."

"Oh," Drista said, reaching out and plucking the tiny silk thread from around his wrist. Tommy bit his lip until it hurt.

"Gee, I didn't know they had spiders on Kinoko," Purpled said.

I didn't know that not all spiders were evil, Tommy thought.

"They don't," Tubbo said. "Maybe there are other insects on Kinoko with spinnerets?"

"I dunno," Tommy said, his throat suddenly very, very dry. "I took one of the side doors because it was closer. There were gardens 'n shit."

"Hey, at least we escaped," Purpled said, leaning his head back against the headrest and closing his eyes, looking satisfied. "No casualties, nothing went wrong..."

Tommy bit his lip again as they shot through the atmosphere with barely a shudder, leaving the mushroom planet and its subsequent creepy green moon behind. The stars glittered overhead as he let autopilot take its course back to the *L'manburg*.

Speaking of the *L'manburg*...Tommy turned to Drista. "You gonna contact them? We're out of the planet-wide jammer now."

"Sure," the girl said, reaching up to her throat and ripping off the microphone tape she'd put hours earlier. She reached over and clicked a few switches, tilting her head ever so often. "Aha!"

"Glad to know you know how to be a communications officer," Tommy said dryly.

Drista scowled at him. "I'm training to be a *tactical* officer, Tommy, not a communications officer."

"Still would be a good idea to know how to use communication boards," Purpled called, his eyes still closed. Beside him, Ranboo was already asleep, and Tubbo was half-asleep on the Enderian as well, clutching his arm almost possessively. Lani and Drista were the only ones who looked wide-awake—barring Tommy, of course, who'd had a nasty caffeine and sugar mix.

"This CS-847 to the *L'manburg*, does anyone copy?" Drista said loudly, though it didn't nearly have as much panic in it as Tubbo had when they'd been escaping the Wasteland. "I repeat, this is CS-847 attempting to reach the *L'manburg*."

› *I copy, CS-847. This is the L'manburg. Any mishaps?* ‹

Tommy brightened slightly at Minx's familiar voice. "None," Drista said. "Not a single scratch. Not a bruise. Nope. Nothing."

› *That's surprising. Shall I refer you over to the bridge?* ‹

"Nah," Drista said. "Just tell them we'll be arriving in t-minus eight minutes." Tommy gave her a small thumbs up. "Ranboo, Purpled, and Tubbo are all tired."

› Copy that. Glad to see you guys back safely. L'manburg out. ‹

By the time Tommy safely piloted the civilian shuttle into the bay of the *L'manburg*, Purpled, Ranboo, Tubbo, and Lani were all asleep. Tommy thought that the only reason he and Drista were still up was because of the caffeine.

Niki, Sapnap, and Kristin met them in the docking bay. Tommy took the gleeful liberty of poking Ranboo, Tubbo, and Purpled awake, whereas Drista just shook Lani as hard as she could until the Shulker girl fell off the bench.

"You guys okay?" Kristin asked worriedly as Niki brandished her medical bag, and Tommy squeaked and hid behind a yawning Ranboo that was being forced to carry Tubbo in his arms.

"Jus' tir'd," Ranboo mumbled. "Dancin'...exhausting..."

"Any injuries?" Niki demanded.

Drista waved her off, much to Tommy's relief. "Nothing," she said. "Everything went perfectly."

"You can say that again," Sapnap said, pulling out his datapad with an earnest smirk on his face and scrolling through some app. "You guys are trending!"

"Huh?" Tommy asked stupidly.

"Social media," Sapnap said. "Look!" He spun the datapad around, and Tommy leaned in, eager to see what the Blazeborn was all torn up about. He groaned quietly when he saw the still-motion picture of Ranboo mid-teleport, upside down and facing the ground, his feet in the air and Tommy about two, their hands touching. This was moments before Tommy had caught him and swung him safely using his Avian abilities, but...

"Does that headline say they're dating?" Drista asked sharply.

"...rumors," Sapnap admitted.

"Nooooooo," Tubbo whined, grabbing ahold of Ranboo's neck and glaring at Tommy. "He's *mine*."

"Why do you only wake up now?" Ranboo sighed.

"Mine," Tubbo said, his lower lip sticking out.

"Don't worry," Tommy said. "I don't fucking want him."

"I suppose I should take insult to that," Ranboo said, eyeing him.

"Mine," Tubbo repeated.

Ranboo sighed forlornly. "I'm going to bed," he announced, Tubbo hanging off his neck like a monkey as he walked towards the bay doors.

"Can I please have the files for the debrief tomorrow morning?" Kristin asked Lani, who summoned them with a sleepy wave—both a drive and a manilla folder. Tommy tried not to think of the papers that Deo had handed him—and, subsequently, taken away. "Good job, kids," she said. "Wilbur and Phil'd be here, but Wilbur fell asleep at his desk, and Techno carried him to bed—which is why Minx answered your comm, I suppose. And Phil fell asleep too, reading a book. Techno is currently doing paperwork, but I bet he'll meet you in the hallway."

"I can't believe everyone thinks I'm dating Ranboo just 'cause I danced with him," Tommy groaned. "That's gross."

"Not everyone," Sapnap corrected. "Some people are yelling at the ones that think you're dating because platonic love is a thing."

"Duh," Drista said. "Goodnight, Niki, Kristin, Sapnap."

"Goodnight," Niki said with a bright grin. Sapnap tilted his head, and Kristin gave a motherly smile, with dimples and gladness in her eyes.

As they rounded the corner, Drista pulled Tommy aside. Lani tilted her head, and them, curious, and Purpled turned around. Drista waved them on. "I need to talk to Tommy," she said. "Privately."

"Night, Tommy," Purpled said. "Goodnight, Drista. Don't let the r'kylush ty'lim'en bite."

"Shut up," Drista said.

"Goodnight, you guys," Lani said, far more passively, as she stretched and yawned. Tommy waved goodnight to her, and she beamed before turning around and rounding the corner. Purpled wavered a little bit before following, giving Tommy a meaningless look before he vanished.

"I was lying," Drista said suddenly.

"Huh?" he said stupidly.

"About Dream withdrawing us," she explained with a wave of her hand. "From...spy school. Or whatever. He didn't."

"You're still in it?" Tommy asked incredulously.

"No!" Drista said snappishly. Tommy reared back sharply. "Sorry. No. No, of course not. I wasn't lying about being there for two years. No—we were, uh, kicked out. Or at least I was."

"Oh," Tommy said. "Did you fail a mission?"

Drista shook her head. "They were getting fewer funds from the government for new trainees—you know, because of child soldier laws, which makes sense—so they had to cut the class down."

"Oh," Tommy said again.

"Dream was gonna withdraw us anyway," Drista said hurriedly. "But...I mean, I was the best in my class. Dream was a full spy already, like my parents. But I was still training, and I was the fucking *best*..." she clenched her fists. "They cut me anyway."

Tommy swallowed, knowing the leading question but almost afraid to ask. "Why?" he said. "Because you were a girl?"

"No!" Drista said, biting her lip. "They actually much preferred girls because we were less suspicious generally than boys. I was cut..." she breathed out. "I was cut because I was Human." Shit, *shit*. "Because even though I could complete the courses faster than my Feline classmates, I would never be better than them naturally. Because I wasn't any of *them* —Merlings were useful on water planets, and Elytrians can fucking fly and Shulkers—you *saw* Lani's role in the mission today! It's cool...and I'm not."

"Drista..." he whispered.

"No," the girl said. "No, I know what you're going to say. We've had this conversation before, and I *understand* better, now, than I did before. Far better." She looked away, and in the night dimness of the lights, Tommy could see tears on her face. "But—it still hurts, sometimes."

"Are you mad about what happened today?" he asked.

"No," Drista said. "I don't want to crawl through vents anyway, and I'm no good at tech like Tubbo, and I'm not a Shulker." She shrugged. "I enjoyed the mission—I do enjoy singing like that, even if I don't do it publicly very often. I'm not mad about that."

"You have a very nice singing voice," he offered.

"Thanks," Drista said dryly. "I wouldn't have done that if I hadn't had one." She shook her head. "Sometimes I feel like I'm falling behind. I mean, you're an Avian."

"I think I'd rather be Human," Tommy said.

Drista stared at him. "What?"

He smiled sadly. "Drista, there's a reason that I thought Chroma was good for the longest time, and they—the others, the members of the Children's Rebellion—had to constantly convince me that he wasn't. Grian, most of all." He tapped his mind. "Elytrian bonds. Avian bonds. Similar, but different. Elytrian has...more physical. Close-term communication through words. Near telepathy, or whatever. That's what Phil and Kristin have—they gotta get mind-melders, people who've practiced with that shit for years and years to create that bond, even though Kristin is Human. But Avian bonds...there isn't any telepathy. Just emotions." Drista looked confused. "Basically, if Rae is close enough, I can feel her emotions if I take down my mental barrier. She can feel mine. We can...send them to one another."

"Sounds cool," Drista commented warily.

"It is," he said. "It's meant for families. That's why Avian fledglings spend so much time with their families. When they're very young, they form bonds with the people closest to them." Shock filled Drista's face. "See, you can see where that can go very wrong. That's why Avians are protective of their young—and their secrets. Imagine if that had gotten out to the galaxy!" He spread his arms wide. "Do you know how many *kidnappings* could take place?"

"Lots," Drista whispered.

"Indeed," he said. "So many. So our children learn how to build their barriers young, but they usually bond with their parents. I had one with Mom and Dad." He shrugged. "They broke with their deaths. They can *only* break in the death of one side. Elytrian bonds can be broken through the use of a mind-melder." Tommy opened up his barrier and smiled, feeling Rae's pulsing glow in his mind. She was far too far to feel anything, but she was there and alive. He pointed in her direction, about his seven-o'clock and slightly downwards. "She's out there," he said. "Rae. It's a compass. I can always find her."

"That's a good thing," Drista said firmly.

"Yes," he said. "Until an Avian decides to force a bond on another Avian simply because they *can*, or because they're weak from broken bonds."

Drista's face flashed at his leading answer, and comprehension and dawning horror filled her. "Chroma—"

"—is an Avian," he said tiredly. "And yeah, he forced a bond on me after my final one had been broken—my father. I didn't know because I never accepted it—but I was weak, and my barriers were down, and then it was too late, and all I was was trusting."

Drista gripped his wrist, her face white. "Does that mean he can find you?" she said urgently.

"No, no," Tommy said. "I broke the bond the day that my friends were executed. It was already nearly fragmenting anyway."

"You said—"

"I know what I said," he said. "But it was forced, and I never accepted it, so my side never activated—so when I broke it, I didn't die, and Chroma didn't die...unfortunately. And I realized that he was *evil* and terrible, and I was so fucking wrong, and I should have killed him months earlier." He shrugged. "Maybe if I had...maybe if I had, things would have been different."

"They would have been," Drista said. "Of course they would have been different. But you can't blame yourself—"

"I can," he said firmly. "I should have known better. I was grieving and in pain, but that doesn't mean I should have trusted Chroma after he was able to walk into the Wasteland and take me." Chroma had just been allowed to take him out of the prison and to F970-RB—codenamed the Red Planet. Why? Why had Tommy, a literal prisoner of war and the sole survivor of the *H.M.S Fran's* demise, been allowed to just...leave? Sure, albeit with Chroma, but Deo had said that not all Arachnids agreed with Chroma. Or fighting against the Galactic Rebellion.

Should he even believe Deo?

It was plausible that the Galactic Rebellion had Arachnid spies. The Arachnids sure had Galactic Rebellion spies. That was how war worked—betrayal on both sides; information and want for power.

"He was able to just...walk in?" Drista said dubiously. "I thought that he wasn't working with the Arachnids."

"I dunno," he said. "Not directly. There are three separate sides. Or more."

Drista sighed heavily. "This is so weird," she complained. "Talking about war."

"We don't have to—"

"No, no," she said. "I wasn't complaining. Just. It's like a fever dream, you know?"

"No," he said. "I've never had a fever dream."

There was a slight pause.

"Oh," Drista said. "That's a bit odd."

"I mean, I don't really get sick," he said.

"You're jinxing it," Drista replied.

"Perhaps," he said unblinkingly. "Or maybe this is the universe's way of apologizing for all the shit it's thrown at me."

Drista's eyes relaxed ever so slightly. "If I've learned anything, Tommy," she said softly. "The universe never apologizes."

"And the universe said the light you seek is within you," Tommy quoted quietly. "And the universe said you are not alone—and the universe said you are not separate from every other thing." He let out a quiet breath, ignoring Drista's curious look. "And the universe said I love you because you are love."

"What is that?" the Human girl said carefully. "A poem?"

"Yes," he said, closing his eyes. "A poem made for the end."

"It sounds interesting," Drista said. "Who created it?"

He bit his lip slightly. "A group of young individuals believing that it was their end that drew near," he said cryptically, and Drista blinked at him, green eyes uncomprehending. "Goodnight, Drista," he said.

"Night, Tommy," she said, curiousness still evident in her voice as she bid him goodbye. "I'll see you at debrief."

"Let's hope it's not too early," he joked.

"It's at 0730."

"Fuck my life."

Chapter End Notes

A few things worth noting:

- Tommy is tired. So obviously his reaction is...off. Also, he's reeling from an overload of information - because some things are starting to make sense, but he's Tommy, so he's in denial.
- Politics are sort of a huge theme here (I wanted to try writing it), so obviously there's the borderline racism that happens to Humans from other races, despite them being the biggest/leading race, and then there's the racism that Piglins get for being "dumb" and then there's the borderline-racism that Tommy has for ALL arachnids, though he's not 100% like that. And it's true with most wars that sometimes the "enemy" isn't ALL the enemy; like in WWII when Germans came to work for America. Obviously, this is nothing like WWII, but you get the gist. Drista is annoyed that she didn't get to do cool spy things because she's Human, even if Dream was going to withdraw her anyway. She also feels powerless compared to the other children, because people often don't understand the power they hold when they look at others.
- Deo looks 19-21. He's not older, like Chroma or any of the Arachnids at the Wasteland. While that doesn't make Tommy TRUST Deo, he IS more inclined to listen to a younger person.
- Tommy doesn't immediately reach for his Avian powers - they're not reliable, which is why he went for stabbing someone first. As for why he didn't call for help...he's not quite used to not being alone. And by the time he remembered the ring, Deo had convinced him that he wasn't going to murder him (doesn't mean Tommy believed him, but Deo didn't actively try to kill him...so whatever.)
- The reason Tommy doesn't immediately tell the others about Deo is because of what Deo told him about his parents. Obviously he'd also have to tell the crew that his parents were working with the Arachnids (according to Deo) and he wants to desperately believe Sam wasn't working with the "enemy".
- History was written by the winners - or in this case, biased based on the rulers. So Deo was told some things at birth, and so was Tommy. Who knows who is right. :)

Sickness

Chapter Notes

after another car accident & two power outages, this chapter has been scraped together from the blood of my enemies to be written...so...

...here.

it has been a beautiful fight.

still is.

- Anonymous

Tommy had to have somehow jinxed it, because when Tubbo broke into his room and woke him up fifteen minutes to debrief, he was told that Purpled had fallen ill.

"What?" he said, grabbing Tubbo's shoulders and shaking the Shulker rapidly. Mellohi yowled, unhappy that she'd been woken up, and proceeded to knead her not-dull claws into his uniform pants. He hissed in pain, pushing the dhi'sk away from him and back onto her sleeping pillow. Because it was hers. He didn't want it anymore.

"Not like that," Tubbo said, extracting himself from Tommy's grip carefully. "It's just a cold."

"Are you—"

"Niki and Ranboo both checked," Tubbo said, rolling his eyes. "He's fine. Just a runny nose and a sore throat. Not even a fever. I was just telling you so you wouldn't wonder why he's wearing a medical mask at debrief."

"What from?" he asked, stretching slightly and getting off the bed, trying to shake off the bad dreams he'd had, full of spiders and betrayal and an Arachnid teenager assuring him that the spiders were friendly and could be trusted even as they bit him from head to toe.

"If you ask me, I'd say the dusty vents," Tubbo said. "It's just a cold. Nobody really knows where those originate from."

Tommy sagged back slightly, blinking his sleep-encrusted eyes. "For a moment there, I thought—"

"Yeah," Tubbo said, wincing. "Perhaps not the best way to tell you. I didn't exactly think about that."

He'd thought that maybe Purpled's deadly sickness from Pogtopia had returned. Just for a second, but a second had been enough...

"It's fine, man," he said, yawning slightly. "Get out of my room so I can get changed."

"Okay, okay," Tubbo said, rolling his eyes. "I'll be waiting outside, though."

He groaned. "There goes my chance of going back to sleep," he said forlornly. "I don't get why I need to be there. All I did was talk to some women—" Had he? "—and dance with Ranboob."

"You're part of the team, dumbass," Tubbo replied, tilting his head slightly before he left the room, closing the door with a slight flick of his hand.

"Clementine, is he really there?" Tommy asked tiredly.

» **Yes, Ensign Tommy.** «

"Can you please just call me Tommy?" he said, his heart aching slightly as he padded over to his wardrobe and pulled out an everyday *L'manburg* uniform, throwing the jacket over his sleep clothes and trading his pants out.

» Of course, Tommy. «

Tommy sighed again, hopping around, trying to tie his boots as he thought about yesterday's events. It hadn't gone at all like he thought it would—God, he'd met an Arachnid that had absolutely shattered his world. That had made everything come to a splintering stop as he'd stopped to regard the information bestowed upon him.

He stepped outside the door with his laces poorly tied—Tubbo raised an eyebrow at him, and he stuck his tongue out obstinately. The Shulker only gave a small sigh and started plodding on down the hallway. Tommy blinked in the brightness of it compared to his room that he'd slept in, squinting slightly to dissuade the moderately bright rays from assaulting his eyes.

"Come *on*, Tommy!"

He grumbled some choice words under his breath at Tubbo's peppiness and followed the smaller boy down the hallway, hands in his pockets. Fortunately, the ship wasn't extremely cold or anything, and Tommy didn't have to raise his shoulders and curl into the collar of his uniform to gain warmth. That had been true with the *H.M.S Fran* sometimes—though usually, it was too hot, in the end, because of the Piglins.

They took the lift to the same floor the brief had been on, though this time, Tubbo herded Tommy towards *Debriefing Room 2* instead of *Briefing Room 1*. He yawned tiredly as they stepped through, tilting his head slightly as he saw his friends in various states of irritability—and sleep, perhaps, in Drista's case, because she had her head lying on the table with her eyes closed and was drooling slightly. Lani was nibbling at a granola bar with bright pieces of colored candy in them—he'd have to get one sometime and pick out the pieces of candy. Ranboo was leaning back in his chair, blinking his red and green eyes slowly as if trying to dispel the sleep from his head. Purpled, the cheater, was sipping from coffee, a mask pulled over his chin—not the absolute black death of pure caffeine Drista had forced Tommy to drink—looking bright-eyed despite the time and small numbered hours of sleep.

"Good morning, Tommy," Phil said, smiling slightly as his wings moved to curl further around the Elytrian's body—perhaps of their own jurisdiction. Techno grunted from next to him. "How'd you sleep?"

He glared furiously at the captain as he plopped down next to Purpled, grabbing the Human's coffee out of his hands and downing the rest of it in one swoop, shuddering at the brief bitterness and chocolate that brought him memories of that stupid pure caffeine drink Drista had forced him to drink on Kinoko. "Maybe I'd sleep better if I got more sleep." Hopefully, he wouldn't get sick from sharing Purpled's germs.

"You'll get to sleep after this, gremlin," Wilbur chided him, and Tommy turned his glare upon the Phantom. To his credit, he didn't flinch.

"After is not now."

"Patience is a virtue, Theseus," Techno said in a low voice, tilting his head. Tommy noted that his hair was currently in some sort of elaborately braided bun—this early in the morning, too. He didn't know how Techno had the patience.

"Not technically," Dream spoke up from where he sat next to his sleeping sister. "Faith, hope, charity, fortitude, justice—"

Techno snorted in disgust. "It's a *sayin'*, Dream."

"I was merely stating—"

Philza cleared his throat loudly, and everyone shut up. "Let's not have the children stay here any longer than necessary, shall we?" he asked, the crow's feet around his eyes crinkling as he smiled.

"Not a child," Tommy grumbled.

"Are too," Purpled said.

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am—"

"Tommy, please," Philza said. "You can go back to bed after this." Tommy shut his mouth and stuck his tongue out at Purpled. "We should have done the debrief last night, but I think half of you would have fallen asleep at the table." He glanced at Drista. "Some of you did anyway."

Drista's hand shot up into the sky; her index finger pointed at the ceiling. "I'm awake. Just resting my eyes."

"You're drooling," Tommy pointed out. The Human girl's fierce green eyes shot open to glare at him as she wiped the spit off her chin.

"You guys are a menace," Dream said.

"I resent that," Drista mumbled.

It was now Philza that looked worn out, despite having only spent five minutes with the group. "Let's just get into it," he sighed. "Wil?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll put the conversation in a bullet-pointed list," the Phantom grumbled in response. "I regret becoming a Communications officer."

"No you don't," Techno said bluntly.

Wilbur tilted his head, nodding. "You're right. I don't."

"Right," Phil said. "Without any *further* interruptions, let's get into it." He turned to Kristin, who thus far had remained quietly in her seat. "You have the papers?"

"And the drive," the Human woman confirmed with a small smile at Lani, the Shulkler girl preening under the glances quietly. "Callahan and I checked. It contains all the necessary information on...on Chroma's sightings within the past three years."

"Good, that's...good," Phil said, glancing at Tommy, who was quietly cringing. Purpled's mouth was in a hard line, and Ranboo was glancing around nervously as if a certain Avian were about to jump out of them from the woodworks. Or metalworks. "As for the six of you...you did your jobs as intended? Nothing went wrong?"

"Ranboo danced with Tommy," Tubbo complained loudly, shooting Tommy a jealous glare.

Phil scoffed quietly. "*Other* than that..."

He wondered if he should tell them—or if they would laugh at him; make a fool of him for believing an Arachnid—despite the evidence, despite the circumstance, despite everything. He wondered if they would never let him out again because of who he was—he wondered if Deo would find him again, wondering about the Artifact.

He had the cipher to the Artifact, and he didn't have the code—Deo did; Deo had held it in his arms like it was the most precious thing in the world. Tommy had the means to get the Artifact—why wasn't he telling them? Why couldn't he open his mouth and tell someone?

Maybe it was because he was scared. Maybe he was scared of what the Artifact was or what it could do. He should have asked Deo before he fled in confused fear. He should have done more.

Maybe he was afraid that Deo was telling the truth—that his father had sent messages to the Arachnids; that Sam had found a cipher that worked with the code to find the Artifact—that he, Tommy Innes, was the only living person, only *thing*, only being in the entire fucking universe, that had the means to find the Artifact.

Then again, it could be an elaborate ruse to get the cipher out of Tommy's head.

But Deo hadn't known he had the cipher. Deo had assumed that Sam had gotten it off the *H.M.S. Fran*—and Deo had been right about that...but if everyone knew Tommy held the cipher, wouldn't they have captured him and tortured him for information? The Arachnid had definitely had the chance unless Tommy had gotten his wits together to stop his heart—he'd been too busy panicking to even think properly.

And so Tommy bit his lip and kept his jaw shut, ignoring the lump in his throat. Deo could be lying. Worse, Deo could be telling the truth. Later. He'd tell them later. He would.

"Well, that's a first," Wilbur said dryly. "Nothing went wrong. Nothing happened."

"Tommy danced—"

"Yeah, yeah, we get it," Drista said flippantly. "Ranboo cheated on you, blah blah blah. But nothing went wrong!" She brightened, and Tommy wanted to sink lower and lower into his chair. "Nothing happened! No planets blew up, no sneak attacks..."

"Right," Phil said. "Well, unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on who's looking at it—our tactical officers have—barring Drista—have read the contents of the folder and drive and sent it on to Command." The captain sighed. "There are multiple people—by name—who claim to have seen Chroma in the past year." Tommy blinked, jaw dropping slightly. Purpled made a slight noise of discontent behind his blue and white mask, leaning forward slightly. Ranboo just turned a darker shade of white and black—if that was possible—to convey his nervousness. "I would dismiss the other three children in this room, if all three of you wouldn't immediately blab to them about what happened. So. Best to have firsthand information."

"Fair enough," Drista muttered.

"Multiple ships have been sent out to planets to talk to each of the people who have claimed to see the war criminal," Phil continued, a touch uncomfortably. "Including the *Mira*, who are having to turn back a few lightyears and putting their long-term mission on pause for a week as they do this." He met Tommy's eyes carefully. "If you are wondering, this is by volunteer only—they did turn back because they wanted to." Tommy knew what was coming. "Now, if you are not *opposed* to it, there is a Human woman in a space station twenty-six light-years from our current position on the

way back to Terra who, three months ago, claims to have sighted Chroma and subsequently reported it to the Galactic Rebellion intel station."

"Oh..." Ranboo said in a small voice.

"If we travel at warp factor five, we should reach there within fourteen hours," Dream said, tilting his head slightly.

Phil raised a hand. "This is not necessary," he said, speaking to the three occupants of the room that were staring at him. "You do not have to do this. None of you do. This is your decision to make, not mine—nor anyone else's on the ship besides the three of you. If you do not want to do it, then we shall respect your opinion and continue to Terra. Other volunteer ships shall do it instead. It is not a waste; it is not anything. Do not feel obligated to do this."

Tommy glanced over at Ranboo and Purpled, his heart pumping in his throat. Chroma. They were close to finding him—to getting their revenge. Ranboo dipped his head ever so slightly when Tommy asked a wordless question, and Purpled raised an eyebrow in a sense that meant, *are you fucking stupid? Of course.*

"Then yes," he said, clasping his hands beneath his desk and trying to ignore the sweat in between his fingers. "Yes. We'll do it."

"Yeah, not Purpled," Techno said in a low voice, and the Human's jaw dropped.

"What?" Purpled demanded.

"You're sick," Techno said, deadpan. "This is a long-term-illness medical station. You could put quarantined patients in danger by bringin' your germs in. The people going in are going to have to pass some medical tests anyway."

Tommy suddenly regretted drinking Purpled's coffee.

"That's not fair," Purpled said.

"Life's not fair," Techno said. "We're not going to kill Chroma right now, kid." Purpled glanced away. "It might even be a dud. She could have no information, or simply useless info. You'll get your chance."

"You could have said it a bit nicer," Wilbur chided gently.

"The world isn't kind," Purpled said, to Tommy's surprise. "Besides. Techno is right. It could be a dead end." He scowled. "Though I sort of hope it's not."

"Don't we all," Tommy said dryly.

"Right," Dream said, standing up. "I'm going to go chart our course. Techno...?"

"I get it," the half-Piglin said. "You need help."

"That's not what I meant; *you're* the stand-in navigator—"

Tommy watched them leave with suddenly tired eyes. The coffee must've been weak or not kicked in.

"Go back to bed, Tommy," Wilbur said gently. "I'll wake you up a few hours for the mission briefing."

Drista yawned. "Better wake me up, bitch," she said. "Don't only wake him up 'cause he's your family."

There was a moment of silence. Tommy wondered how Drista had found out. Phil cringed slightly—clearly, amidst the chaos of worrying about the mission and sleeping, he'd forgotten to tell his other two adopted kids.

"What?" Wilbur said carefully.

"Your...brother," Drista said, blinking. She frowned, looking at Tommy. "Did you do that thing where you went off without telling everyone again?"

"He does that a lot," Purpled said wryly. "Even I don't know what you're talking about this time."

"Phil and Kristin adopted Tommy, silly," Drista said, and Tommy cringed amidst his tiredness at the surprised looks that Wilbur, Tubbo, Ranboo, Purpled, and Lani threw him. "Oh. So you *didn't* know."

"I was a bit busy," Tommy grumbled.

"You adopted him?" Wilbur asked Phil. Tommy wondered if Wilbur was mad.

Then—no, it was Wilbur. Wilbur wouldn't be mad.

"I didn't expect him to say yes so fast," Phil said dryly. "I thought that he'd want to wait a few weeks. And then the mission happened, and you and Techno were worrying—don't tell Techno I said that, by the way—so I withheld telling you in case you got even more worried."

Wilbur scowled. "I wouldn't have been more worried," he said. "You should have told me!"

"Does it matter now?" Phil asked.

"I'm going back to bed," Tommy grumped. "It's too early for this."

"It's like eight ship time—"

"Don't know you, don't care," he said, waving a hand flippantly.

"Aw, Toms, you're my baby brother—"

"Shut the fuck up, you massive prick," he snarled, his face going slightly red at the title. Purpled smirked widely—Tommy could tell, even under the mask. "Fuck off."

"It's time to wake up, Tommy," someone crooned near his ear.

"Go 'way," he grumbled, rolling over and pulling the covers over his head. "'m tired."

"No, no, you have to get up, child," the voice said, and Tommy cracked open a sleepy eye to see a brown-haired Phantom staring down at him.

"Fuck off."

"You've already said that today."

"Newsflash, bitch," he growled. "I can say multiple things in one day."

"Wow, I didn't know you had it in you."

"You woke me up," he grumbled, swatting Wilbur's hand away from his hair, which the Phantom had been steadily moving towards. "Hey! Don't touch my hair."

"It's a mess," Wilbur pouted.

"Yeah, and if it's a huge bother, I'll get Techno to fix it," Tommy said, patting his head to dissuade a few stray strands.

"But I'm your brother," Wilbur said, making small grabby hands at him. Tommy eyed him warily. "Please? I know the braid that Tech usually does at the back. I can do it for you."

Tommy sighed, knowing Wilbur probably wasn't going to give in unless he got his way. "Fine," he said, sitting up and turning his back to the Phantom. "What's the debriefing about, anyway?"

"The mission," Wilbur said, grabbing the small twine that Techno had been using on Tommy's hair from the bedside table.

He snorted. "No shit."

"Well, if you're wondering, it's just an intel gathering, so..." Wilbur trailed off as his fingers nimbly traced their way through Tommy's hair, dividing and twining and braiding. "...Purpled was originally going to go, but he got ill, so it'll just be you, Ranboo, and our brother."

"Huh?" he asked stupidly, jerking slightly.

Wilbur tsked and yanked on his hair slightly. "Don't move," he said, irritated. "You'll make things wonky."

"You're wonky."

"I..." Wilbur paused mid-sentence, though his hands never stopped moving in Tommy's hair, gently moving the strands to where the braid was forming. "I don't even know what to say to that."

"Good, bitch," Tommy said smugly, pulling away when Wilbur was done and glancing at the small mirror hung—by Tubbo—on his door. It was slightly messier than Techno's, if a bit more eloquent. "It's because I'm amazing and cool."

"...no, but go off," Wilbur said, patting him on the head. Tommy hissed at him angrily, glancing in the mirror furiously and patting at his again-ruffled hair. "Hey! You're acting like a raccoon, you feral thing, stop hissing—"

Tommy didn't know why he panicked. Maybe it was the raccoon thing, and maybe it was because of the eerie dreams he'd had the previous night—but he panicked and froze, and Wilbur's mouth stopped making sounds, only empty words with no meaning behind them. The datapad that he'd grabbed from his bedside table—with a connect four online game turn lighting up the screen from a certain Shulker boy—dropped and hit the soft carpeted ground.

Raccoon.

The title itself didn't bother him a bit, but suddenly he was thinking of Deo and his stupid bright orange shirt and his sunglasses and the mandibles in his mouth—and he wasn't *afraid*, not exactly...but he was something else. Deo had called him a raccoon, and there hadn't been any malice behind it—just as there wasn't any behind Wilbur's endless teasing and stupid titles and jokes. Deo, the Arachnid. Deo, his *enemy*. Deo, part of a race that had killed his father and his aunt and had willingly handed him over to the Arachnids.

God, he was such a fucking idiot. It was just a word. Just a stupid endearment.

Deo, who'd said that his father had been working *with* the Arachnids to uncover the Artifact. Deo, who'd insisted and handed him transcripts of messages he hadn't bothered—hadn't wanted—to read. Deo, who'd stuck up his arms—in *self-defense*, the traitorous part of his mind whispered—and then cut him with the same pink knife that Purpled had given him for his birthday what seemed like a billion years ago. Deo, who'd shattered his world with a straightforward conversation—who had told him that not all Arachnids wanted war, that there were those working towards peace. Tommy, who'd told Deo that the Galactic Rebellion hadn't stolen the Artifact, and Deo, who hadn't outright refused that fact—had merely tilted his head and admitted that that wasn't what he'd been taught.

And Tommy...had pushed towards the fact that not all Arachnids could be evil. He had. And now that he was faced with it—now that there was *proof*—why couldn't he deal with that? Why was he like this? Why was he slipping back into a space founded in his youth?

"—ommy? Tommy?! "

He started, blinking slightly, and found someone's hands on his shoulders and warm brown eyes—worried—looking into his own. "Ayup, Big Man," he said, suddenly feeling far more tired than he'd felt even before his nap.

"You...went somewhere," Wilbur said, backing off from the touch but still standing in his space. "Is it because of something I said? I'm sorry—"

"No," Tommy said and then winced, thinking of Bad's chiding words about triggers and tellings. "Okay, yes, but it's just memories, Big Man."

Wilbur paused, staring at him. "I'm sorry," he said again.

"No need to be," Tommy said, waving it off as he bent down and picked up his datapad, throwing a slight glance at his bookshelf, suddenly wanting to be nowhere else than picking up the seventh book of the series Ranboo had given him—he was almost done, the hero had almost won. "It was nothing...bad."

"You sure?" Wilbur asked warily. "I won't call you a—a certain procyonid anymore—"

"I don't even know what that fucking word means," he cut in. "But if it means raccoon—" Wilbur's wincing only confirmed his words. "—then you do not need to worry. Someone just...called me a raccoon once. It brought up questions that I haven't yet answered."

"Was it Chroma? I'm—"

"Stop *fucking* jumping to conclusions," he snarled, and Wilbur paused, blinking like a deer caught in headlights. He shook his head and laughed when he realized he'd used an old Terran metaphor from the book series, and Wilbur gave him an odd look. "Not everything's about Chroma."

"Of course not," Wilbur said.

"It's not—it's not him," Tommy said, pushing through the lump in his throat. "It was someone else." Wilbur tilted his head—a silent question. "Not a friend, I think." *I think*. "Nor an enemy either, if

my consciousness has any say in it." He snorted, shaking his head. "I don't know what he was—*is*. I don't know."

He wondered if he would find out. The pictures on the wall gleamed back, daring him to find answers to his questions.

You are a fucking wrong'un

Chapter Notes

yesterday was my birthday

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Once you're accepted your flaws,
no one can use them against you.*

- Tyrion Lannister

Tommy, after multiple sessions with Niki and some blood and saliva and piss tests—he'd chortled at that until the ferocious Merling lieutenant had stabbed him with a few hyposprays on account of *missing a few vaccines*—was declared free of any sicknesses, infectious diseases, or internal issues. Which was decidedly good—and decidedly lucky, if the same cup that Tommy had drunk from that morning hanging in Purpled's hand had anything to do with it. After an hour or so, Technoblade and Ranboo were also proclaimed uninfected and cleared to enter the medical station, where they would remain for three days, checking in every twelve hours with a member of the *L'manburg's* communication team—Wilbur, Minx, or Quackity.

Purpled pouted beneath his mask, but Tommy saw the quiet divide between thankfulness and rage the boy was warring between. The same war that was riddled in Ranboo's multi-colored eyes, the same war that battled in his heart. He was scared.

(No, he wasn't.)

He was terrified.

(He was brave.)

He wanted to see this through.

(He wanted others to do this for him; he never wanted to see Chroma unless it was to put the Avian behind bars.)

He wanted revenge.

(He wanted to scream at the sky; at the grass, at anyone would listen about the deaths of his friends, his roommates, the colony.)

He wanted to cry.

(He wanted to hold his chin up and stare down everything he had ever feared and turn away with a smirk on his face and victory in his heart.)

"Right, Tommy, you'll be piloting the vessel," Phil said, and he blinked his last war-torn thoughts from his eyes and forced himself to listen to his—to the captain. Yes. That. That was probably important. They were in the docking bay, after all. "It's one of the official *L'manburg* crafts this time, like the one that picked you and Lani and Drista up on Icarus-45HB."

"Great," he said, mustering all the sarcasm he could manage at the moment. "So no more Arachnid or citizen's vessels? Will these ones have guns?"

"The one that you and I flew away from the Wasteland had guns, Tommy," Tubbo said with some amusement, from where he was glued to Ranboo's side before they left. Clearly he had separation problems.

"Gee, too bad that they seemed not to be working."

"They *were* working! I took out like five ships!"

"They weren't really firing back at us," Tommy snorted.

"Yeah, please leave the firing to Drista and me," Dream spoke up with a fond smile.

Tubbo flipped the room off smoothly. "You're all assholes." There was a repentant pause. "Except you, Ranboo, my beloved."

"Please don't call me that," the Enderian said with a sigh.

"Of course, *my beloved*."

"I regret hiring children," Phil groaned, pinching his forehead. At his side, and in front of a jet-black wing that was wrapping its way around her shoulders, Kristin winked.

"He loves you," she faux-whispered. Phil threw her a recreant glare, and she rolled her eyes.

"I knew that," Tommy proclaimed.

"Of course you did, Theseus," Techno rumbled.

"Don't call me that," he muttered, stepping firmly down on Techno's foot. To his credit, the half-Piglin didn't even blink an eye at the pain—and it was Tommy's total weight; it had to be *somewhat* painful.

"You sound like Ranboo," Purpled said.

"*Don't* compare me to boob boy," he snarled, with no real heat behind it.

"Oh, come on!" Ranboo complained. "Even when I'm not the butt of the joke, I'm still the butt of the joke! *How?*"

"Maybe because you're a butt," Tubbo said cheekily.

"*Anyway*," Phil said in a highly conservative voice. "We'll be near. Nearer than we were to Kinoko anyway. Niki and Lani have sanitized the ship properly and cycled the air—we can't make contact in case any nasty germs get released into the air of the station." He glanced at Purpled, who raised a blonde eyebrow. "Check-ins are every twelve hours. Techno, you're in charge of that. The ship has transmission." He'd already talked about the no-datapad rule. Apparently, those were highly nasty and would be a hassle to clean. But the ship had transmission abilities.

"What if he's indisposed?" Tommy interrupted.

Phil sighed. "Why would he be indisposed, Tommy?" he asked, pinching his nose like he'd both expected and begrudged this question.

"Maybe he got shot," Tommy said.

"If I were shot, you'd have other issues," Techno rumbled.

"Unless *I* shoot you," Tommy pointed out smugly, pointing towards the holster at Techno's side. "Steal your gun and shit."

"That's why you don't have a phaser," Wilbur said. "It's also against regulation, as this is an intel mission, and you are a *child*."

"I had one on the Arachnid starship," he said.

"Yeah, and I had to sign a shit-ton of paperwork for that," Philza said. "Because it was against direct orders and notably against regulations." Tommy gulped, even as Tubbo grinned and Purpled snickered. "Even if it worked out." He added that last part like it pained him. "This is a medical station, Tommy. If an Arachnid warship pops into space, you won't be worrying about having a phaser. You'll be worrying about not getting blown up."

"Eh, I've survived that already," he said. "'Cause I'm a Big Man and shit."

"Sure, mate," Phil said sarcastically. "Just—stay safe. The woman you're talking to—she's visiting this place, and we're meeting up here. Her daughter is terminally ill. Don't say anything rude." There was a pregnant pause.

"Was that directed towards me?" Tommy wondered aloud.

"Yes," seven different people said at once. Tommy glared at them—rats, the lot!—Wilbur, Ranboo, Purpled, Tubbo, Drista, Dream, and Lani.

"You all are bitches," he said. "Traitors. I'd say more, but then I would be a wrong'un."

"Please, Tommy," Purpled said, his lips twitching up into a sick sort of grin. "You couldn't tell a wrong'un if they were looking at you in the face, putting their arms around your shoulders—smiling over breakfast." There was a bit of an awkward pause as Ranboo blinked rapidly and the rest of the rooms' occupants just looked slightly uncomfortable. "Fortunately, Grian was there to set you right."

"Couldn't you have done it yourself?" he said, half-jokingly, touching on a topic that probably should have been far more private. "Had to have Grian do your dirty work?"

Purpled gave a slight shrug. "He was the oldest," he said. "Besides, I don't think we realized how much of a wrong'un Chroma was until you started coming back with bruises." If possible, the silence got even more uncomfortable, even if Purpled was hiding his immense amusement in the current predicament.

"And excuses," Ranboo added. Tubbo was staring at Tommy, slightly horrified. Tommy only noticed Tubbo because he was plastered to Ranboo's side. "And gallant tales of what he taught you—to fly—"

"—I still use his teachings," Tommy interrupted. "They were useful, in the end. Hopefully, one day I'll get to turn the lessons upon him." He sneered quietly at the wall.

"You flew with Chroma?" Dream asked quietly, and Tommy risked a slight glance at the Human, startling quietly at the rage quickly hidden behind fluorescent green eyes.

"Of course," he said. "I never did with my father or my aunt, mind. I did sims with them—many, many sims—but I never flew a ship until I met Chroma. Those were the only times I ever flew a ship, too, before Tubbo at the Wasteland." Drista and her brother both sucked in two identical sharp breaths.

"God, this is an even bigger mess than I thought," Wilbur groaned.

Tommy fixed him with a furious glare. "The fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Phil rubbed his face. "Here I was, thinking that it couldn't get any worse," the Elytrian sighed, his wife leaning against his arm—a means of comfort, Tommy supposed. "It got worse."

"Did it?" Tommy asked. "It's been the same for me all along."

"That's because you have more secrets than suicide attempts," Purpled said.

"Most people have more than *one* secret," Techno said carefully.

"Did I say one?" Purpled asked, raising an eyebrow. Techno looked taken aback, his mouth opening and closing—unable or unwilling to respond. Ranboo winced openly, staring at his feet. "That's funny."

Nobody was laughing.

"Purpled," Tommy said in a warning tone.

"Fine, I'll shut up," the Human grouched. "Keep your secrets, Tommy."

He wrinkled his nose. "It's not that important in the long run." Wilbur opened his mouth, ready to argue, but Tommy watched as Kristin touched the Phantom's shoulder and shook her head. There was a tiny flicker of relief in his heart at the lack of questions.

"Goodbye, Tommy," Purpled said finally as Tommy climbed into the *L'manburg* shuttle.

He paused outside the door, tilting his head at the magenta-eyed Human. "Stay safe, Purp."

"I should be telling you the same thing," the boy retorted. "But I don't think I need to."

"I'll keep them safe, kid," Techno rumbled, clapping a hand on Purpled's shoulder as he passed the boy.

"You'd better," Purpled said. "This is Tommy's longest track record of going without being attacked." He scowled angrily but couldn't find an honest argument. "Ranboo. Make sure Tommy stays out of trouble."

The Enderian saluted Purpled, giving a sharp nod. "Ay ay, leader."

"Stop fucking calling me that," Purpled groaned in annoyance as Lani raised a hand to cover her face—and, consequently, her giggles. "I lead *one* mission..."

"Same," Tommy joked. "You lead one rebellion, and suddenly that's all they're calling you." He spread his hands wide in a theatrical performance of a dramatizing portrayal. "Thomas Innes...son of Sam Innes...leader of the Children's Rebellion...all of you others are stuck as members." Purpled stuck out his tongue and rolled his eyes as Tommy chortled at his own joke—the rest of 'em looked dumbstruck. He stepped further into the ship, waving goodbye to the rest of the crew that was bidding them safe travels.

"Goodbye, Boo!" Tubbo called, last of all. "Don't forget me!"

"It'll be three days," Ranboo protested as Tommy grabbed his hand and hauled the straggling Enderian into the vessel. He managed to poke his head out the door anyway. "We're checking in

every twelve hours. I'm not going to forget you."

They didn't hear Tubbo's response as the bay doors shut, and Techno took his seat as Tommy's temporary co-pilot, whereas Ranboo sat down in the gunner's ship, looking slightly nervous.

"Don't worry," Techno told the Enderian as Tommy put on the headset and prepped the ship for launch, remembering how the practiced hands of Wol'fahb'ylle had flicked the switches to get them off Icarus-45HB. "If you have to fire the guns, we'll have other issues."

"Good to know," Ranboo squeaked.

"*L'manburg* shuttle six-five-two to bridge, this is Tommy Innes," Tommy said as he held down the push-to-talk button. "Requesting permission to debark."

› *LS-652, this is communications officer Minx speaking. You are cleared to leave.* ‹

"Thank you, Minx," he said, with a grin in his voice as he peered into the rear window, watching as the last of the well-wishers disappeared past the airlock. He waited for another second for the automatic controls to cycle the air out of the docking bay and open the bay doors before placing his hands on the controls and guiding the shuttle out of the *L'manburg's* docking station. Already he could see their target—a space station of white and pale grey metal floating some twenty kilometers in front of the viewport.

It was a straight flight to the medical station, so Tommy was able to risk a chance to glance away from the target and at the surrounding twinkling lights. One of them was Sol, he knew—though perhaps Techno would know more—and three of them Polaris and one Betelgeuse. More. More stars. Some he could not see because of dark matter or because other things blocked it from sight—planets; asteroid belts—dark matter.

Tommy let out a small breath as he stared into the deep emptiness of space.

Hello, stars, his inner mind whispered, thinking of a certain Elytrian girl who'd never lived to become a full-time ship member. *Sniff says hello*.

The stars, so dark and lonely, did not say anything back. How could they? They were stars.

"There," Techno said suddenly, and Tommy blinked his way out of fond memories to follow the half-Piglin's finger across an exceptionally bright stretch of stars in the sky. "That's the Orion Spur."

"The *what*?" Tommy asked, squinting up at the splash of bright stars across space.

"Via Lactea—also known as the Milky Way, which is our galaxy, is divided into two main 'arms' and a number of spurs—fractures of arms. Terra lies in the Orion Spur. The two main arms are called Perseus and Scutum-Centarus," Techno explained, gesturing to certain parts of the stars through the viewport. Try as he might, Tommy could not differentiate it. "There are also two smaller arms called the Norma arm and the Saggitarius arm. In Terran terms, anyway."

Tommy frowned. "Like the star sign?"

"Yes, that is where it's located," Techno said. "Betelguese—Alpha Orionis, S'tel'ahyr—whatever, is also in the Orion arm." He traced a line up a bit.

"Nerd," Tommy said, unable to stop all the fondness from leaving his voice. "You and Wilbur really are alike."

"We've spent years together, enough for our interests to match," Techno said dryly. "But I can safely take pride in knowin' that I was the one that got Wil interested in astronomy."

"Right," Tommy nodded. "Astrology." Ranboo snorted.

"Bruh," Techno said. "No. Astronomy, child."

"Ass-trah-lo-gee."

"As-tron-oh-mee."

"Astrology."

"Bruh."

Tommy held up a hand to counter any further argument, and Techno fell silent as Tommy began his efforts to contact the medical station—they were expecting him, of course, and unlike Kinoko, the frequency was touched almost immediately. "Medical station two-seven, this is the *L'manburg* shuttle six-five-two attempting to make contact."

› *We read you, LS-652. Your Chief Communications Officer has already forwarded the identification information, and your Chief Medical Officer has confirmed your lack of germs. However, before you can talk to the mother of a patient, we must be sure that you do not carry any inward-dealing diseases. As much as we trust a member of the Galactic Rebellion on medical information, this station is far more equipped to test for infections. Is this clear?* ‹

"Right you are, sir," Tommy said, nodding slightly, even though whoever was on the other side couldn't see him. He'd been warned of this—three days; one to take more medical tests, one to talk to the woman, and one to leave and make sure no infectious diseases were taken out of the medical station.

› *Welcome to Benecia, Thomas Innes. We eagerly await your arrival.* ‹

"Thomas out," he said, ending the transmission. "Well, that went well."

"It could have gone worse," Techno pointed out.

"It could have gone better."

"How?" Ranboo interjected, raising an eyebrow. "This is how we were briefed that it was going to go."

He groaned. "Yeah, yeah. I just wish we wouldn't be doing more stupid medical tests."

"They're hardly stupid," Techno chided. "It is, after all, regulation."

Tommy rolled his eyes. "After so much time spent breaking regulation," he started. "It's hard to imagine following it."

"We do follow it more than we break," Techno said dryly. "You are just not part of the bridge crew." There was a slight pause. "Yet. Nor, of course, are you the paperwork-troll that Purpled is."

"I thought Purpled hated paperwork," Tommy said slowly, putting his hands back on the controls as they neared the medical center—*Benecia*, it was called. "He complains about it all the time."

"Yes, well," Techno said. "He likes being in authority. I suppose after so much time spent out of control and relying on others—" Tommy winced slightly, glancing at Ranboo, who nodded. "—he wants all the knowledge of the going-ons he can get. Any chance to gain more information on the war; the missions—he takes it, even if he spends sleepless hours doing it." Techno sighed, touching his braided hair. "It's better with you and Ranboo around. He tires himself out—"

"—mothering us," Ranboo said.

"Bullying us," Tommy said in unison.

"Both, I should think," Techno said, cracking a slight grin, his lips stretching over two tusks. Tommy did not think of Deo's dark mandibles. He did not. They were nothing alike. "He worries about you two constantly. I know you, Tommy, would have taken the choice to go to the *Benecia*

regardless of who came—barring your enemies, obviously—and perhaps you would have, as well, Ranboo—but Purpled would have never come alone unless there was a certainty that someone he could murder was here. Like Chroma, perhaps. Or some poor soul."

"Chroma is not a *poor soul*," Ranboo spat.

"I never said he was," Techno said calmly. "I said 'or'. Mayhaps it is some person that has aligned themselves with the wrong allies or whatnot."

"We're here," Tommy pointed out, watching as the bay doors opened and he was able to maneuver the shuttle into the smaller docking bay, albeit with some difficulty when Techno had to reach over and pull the parking brake. Tommy scowled. "I knew that, bitch."

"You were about to put us in reverse and break somethin'," Techno said dryly as he unbuckled himself from the seat. Ranboo glanced between them, looking decidedly green.

"I was *not*," Tommy snapped. "I would never. I'm perfect."

"Sure," Ranboo said, shooting him a look. "Perfect."

"Mostly perfect."

Ranboo blinked at him.

"Fifty percent of the time." His mind flickered to the photos on the wall, recovered from Pogtopia after the interview—and carried by Purpled. Percentages. Foolish had always loved his percentages. He thought of the three small photos on the wall that joined the others—pictures of Drista chasing him around the ship; photos of him dragging Tubbo away from Ranboo; photos that Clementine had had when he'd asked. Pictures of Wilbur playing the guitar to him—a single picture that Kristin had taken of him playing the violin on the stage in the park, Tubbo in the background on his piano.

"Ah, percentages," Ranboo said as he stood up and stretched. Techno looked confused, but Tommy nodded his head and followed the Enderian towards the door.

The first day was easy. The three of them were quarantined in a small room—with some water, food, and a deck of cards at Techno's askance. The ship was scrubbed down, and Tommy was generally annoyed at the number of ginny rum games ruined by nurses rushing in and out, demanding more blood tests or telling them the results of the prior ones. About twelve hours in, Techno requested a radio to be brought in so they could update the crew, and the nice nurse lady brought him one. Wilbur, on the other end, was happy to hear they weren't dead.

"Send my love to Tubbo!" Ranboo called gleefully. Tommy mimicked a gagging noise behind him.

» *Will do. Lieutenant Soot signing off. End of transmission.* «

"It's been twelve hours," Techno told Tommy, when the boy tried to persuade them into another game of Hearts. "I'm gonna sleep." He gestured to one of the three cots with padded mattresses on them. "I think the nurses are done with their test results. We should be good." He glanced towards the door as if expecting some doctor or nurse to walk in with another gentle smile and a computerized clipboard. "I think."

"Helpful," Tommy said. "You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Techno said, and Tommy held up his hands as the half-Piglin glared at him.

"Okay, okay, jeez," he grumbled as Ranboo slumped down on the mattress face-first and let out a loud groan. "What's wrong with you?"

"I'm hungry," the boy complained.

Tommy blinked at him and then walked over to the table and grabbed a packet of snacks. "Chorus fruit snacks?"

Ranboo lifted a bleary eye and glared at him. "I usually split my food with Tubbo, and Tubbo with me. It's odd." Tommy tossed the packet at his head, and Ranboo gave an unhappy sigh, tearing it open with black and white claw-like fingers.

"I personally never found my tastebuds for Enderian food," Techno said dryly, having undone the last of his tedious braid, placing the final pin on the bedside table. "It's not particularly to my liking."

Ranboo was not offended, and gave a slight shrug. "Not many people do," he said. "I guess Tubbo doesn't fit into that list."

Techno appraised them both as he lay down with his arms behind his head. "Neither of you falls onto that list either," he said quietly. "Nobody on the *L'manburg* does."

"I suppose not," Tommy agreed, sitting down on his own cot, reaching over and swiping two fingers down the screen-switch to dim the lights. He paused right as he did so, knowing the other two saw his fingers move to dance over the screen, and when there were no complaints, he dimmed them so far they were barely bright enough to see. He shrugged off his coat and stripped down to his undershirt and pants, grabbing his knife out of his pocket and setting it on his bedside table.

"Purpled gave you that, didn't he?" Ranboo said in a low voice, and Tommy glanced over, quietly remembering that while not all Enderians had the ability to teleport as Ranboo did—and had, at the dance, as exhausted as he'd become afterward—all of them could see in the dark. And, while Ranboo, in Enderian-tongue, was classified as *disabled* due to his rare genetic mutation that made half of his skin snow-white and his stomach bear underlying issues—such as his unique allergy to all things that were not eaten with some of his homeland food.

"Huh?" Tommy asked.

"The knife," Ranboo said, and Tommy picked up the knife, pink and shining in the dim light, staring at it.

"Yes," Tommy said. "For my seventeenth birthday."

"Ah," Ranboo said. "I am sorry I did not get you something so memorable. I didn't exactly remember you well."

"That's alright," Tommy said. "Your three cans of frosting were made into a prank, don't worry." Ranboo's eyes widened. "Wilbur's shaving cream debacle? Remember?"

"I thought you stole that," Ranboo said.

"No, those were the cans you got me for my birthday," Tommy said. "And Techno got me the Myth of Theseus, remember?"

"I didn't see that in your shelf the other day," the half-Piglin said conversationally. "Whatever happened to it?"

"I brought it with me on Zee Zee's field trip," he said dryly. "Along with an extra set of civilian clothes—like that one red and white tee that Wilbur got me, that datapad Phil got me, and my red comb." He scowled.

"Well, that sucks," Technoblade said.

"Ever the conversationalist," Ranboo muttered.

"It was a shitty story," Tommy muttered, not really meaning it, as he pulled the covers over his shoulder. "Full of shitty metaphors."

"You read, it then?" Techno said humorously.

"...perhaps," he admitted. "Maybe. Goodnight, fuckers."

"Goodnight, Theseus."

"Shut up."

"Goodnight, Tommy."

Chapter End Notes

this chapter is so boring but it has to be done

the calm before the storm :)

We Are Few And Far Between

Chapter Notes

OH MY GOODNESS!!! [Here](#) is an ANIMATIC created by [Skater](#). I've never had an animatic created before...the song choice was perfect and made me want to cry. DEFINITELY go give her some love :D

All good things must come to an end

eventually.

-Tubbo

"My name is Minerva Harper," the older woman—perhaps around forty—said nervously, her eyes darting around in the sitting room that the four of them were sitting in. The door off to the left had a nameplate that read *Charlotte* on it—leading to believe that this was Minerva's daughter, and she was sleeping in there. "You can call me Minnie, I suppose."

"No, thanks," Techno said dryly, and Ranboo hissed under his breath as Minerva winced at his bluntness. Technoblade forged on. "We're just here on Galactic Rebellion business to hear about your...encounter with a certain war criminal."

"Ah. Yes, of course," Minerva said, her graying hair bouncing nervously as she shifted her gaze to look in between the three of them. "And—and you three...are?"

"T—" he started.

"Theseus," Technoblade said smoothly, and Tommy started before the half-Piglin kicked him under the table. Tommy made a slight face at the pain, but fortunately, Minerva wasn't looking at him—in

fact, she looked more nervous and scared than before. "Theseus Soot-Minecraft." Tommy raised an eyebrow behind Minerva's back, and the half-Piglin gave him an unreadable stare. "And the other one here is Concord. I'm Commander Technoblade of the *L'manburg*."

Tommy tried to keep an unreadable expression as Minerva gave them confused gazes—she'd probably seen them in the newspapers and wasn't willing to call Techno out on his bullshit games. Whatever the half-Piglin was trying to do.

The name Techno had given Ranboo.

Concord. Harmony. Harmonia.

The Greek Goddess who refused to take sides in war, if Tommy remembered correctly. To a fault. He might've laughed, if they'd been in a different situation.

"Oh," Minerva said, blinking slightly. "I thought—" she bit her lip. "I thought someone else would be here."

"Oh, really?" Techno drawled. "Who?"

"...I don't know," the Human said faintly, shrinking under the red-eyed gaze of the half-Piglin. Tommy suddenly realized why Techno was considered scary. He'd hate to be under *that* stare. "...others."

"Right," Techno drawled. "It doesn't matter." He waved his hand. "Please explain your story." There was a slight pause as Minvera swallowed slightly. "Unless you're lyin' about seein' Chroma...?"

"No!" Minerva said quickly. "N-no! I wouldn't do that!"

"Really," Techno said. "That's good." Tommy scowled, mainly at the ceiling. In his opinion, Techno was a bit harsh on the poor woman whose daughter was terminally ill. By the ill look on Ranboo's face, the Enderian clearly agreed with the sentiment. "Well?"

"Oh! Of course," Minerva said, and Tommy was *slightly* annoyed by the speed of this. "Um...it was about three months ago...right after I'd gotten the news that my Lola would be transferred to the *Benecia*." She glanced at the name written on the door, and Tommy realized that Lola must be a nickname for Charlotte. "I was drinking in a bar on—on, gosh, what was it? Snow-Snowshire?"

"Snowchester," Ranboo said, his eyes flicking to Tommy, and he was reminded of the time Purpled and Ranboo had lied about vacationing to that place and gone to Pogtopia instead. And that Tubbo had once gone on some unknown mission there.

"Yes, that's the one," Minerva said, snapping her fingers. "I was drinking in a bar—" she flushed. "—my Lola was sick, and I really couldn't take it, and looking back, it wasn't a good decision, but —"

"Yes, we get it," Techno interrupted. "People get drunk over stupid decisions. Please continue."

"Yes, of course," Minerva said, crimsoning in embarrassment at his bluntness. Tommy was tempted to point out that she had been redder than her regular pale-ish skin tone at this point but kept his mouth shut. Techno was dealing with it. "Anyway, I was about two margaritas in—you know, the smokey-watermelon type ones; those have always been my favorite—" She cut herself off when Tommy coughed under his breath and Techno raised an eyebrow. "Right. Um. Anyway, this nice gentleman came up to me—" Ranboo's hands whitened at the use of *gentleman*—Chroma, of course, had been anything but. "—and the first thing I noticed about him, in my state, is the color of his hair. It's, like—I mean, it *was*, when I saw him—a shiny grey color, but the lights make—made—it shine all the colors of the rainbow."

"Like gasoline," Tommy said through gritted teeth. His skin was crawling.

"Oil, yes, I suppose," Minerva said, throwing him a frightened doe look. "Matches his name, yes. Chroma. Chromatic." She shook her head. "Anyway, he really was quite kind—"

"He always is, at first," Tommy muttered, and Techno nudged him slightly—gently, with a sad look on his face, but a nudge all the same.

"Um, I suppose," Minerva said, licking her lips. She really looked quite nervous—Tommy supposed Technoblade's neutral look and monotonous voice had that sort of effect on people. "He

inquired about—some things. Because I used to go to Fleet school."

"He did?" Techno asked, sounding surprised.

"Ah, yes," Minerva said, her lips curling up in self-loathing. "I graduated about—oh, about seventeen years ago, I think. As a—a diplomat, of sorts." Tommy made a slight noise of surprise, and Minerva glanced at him. "Yes, I get it," she said. "I don't look—or act—like one. Things have changed. Anyway, I graduated, and then I met my late husband—he was a Merling tactical officer on the same ship. We fell in love, I got pregnant...and then I took shore leave in my third trimester." Minerva let out a small breath. "I didn't even know we were *compatible*—Lola's half Merling, which is where her medical issues first started. Anyway, I took shore leave...and then...and then things went wrong, and there was a firing error while attempting to leave the station." Minerva shook her head. "No survivors."

"That was the *Genova*," Techno said.

Minerva nodded. "Yes. Yes, it was. They offered me a new position on a new ship, but..." she shrugged. "I had a kid, and I didn't want to lose her—I lost my love for space after my husband died. Chroma somehow knew about that—I should've known better than that; because not many do—and he expressed his condolences towards my Charlotte, which I also should not have fallen for, but I was intoxicated and sad, and I guess I did."

"Not the smartest move," Tommy pointed out.

Minerva's eyes flashed. "Indeed," she said. "Maybe I should have guessed why he knew about Charlotte and Aldrin—that's my husband—and the explosion of the *Genova*, but...I did not guess." She shrugged again. "We talked a bit. He wanted to know some things. Secrets. Nothing important—I was never a top student like the captains and admirals are. He wanted to know about the *L'manburg*." Ranboo inhaled sharply, his pointed ears flicking slightly—one black, one white. "When I was a child, that ship was named the *Manburg* and bore a different crew than the one it does now. Mushroom spores, I believe."

"Technically speaking, yes," Technoblade said, and Tommy vaguely remembered Tubbo and Niki mentioning that.

Minerva nodded. "Wanted to know about some...kids, I think? 'Course, I knew nothing except what the tabloids said." She snorted. "They ain't say much, either. I know a bit about the Red Planet and

the Children's Rebellion—" She gave Tommy and Ranboo a sidelong glance. "—but, I mean, who *doesn't*? So I couldn't really say much. He wanted to know if I'd seen...a third kid? Golden hair, blue eyes." Techno coughed slightly.

"There are lots of kids like that," Tommy pointed out when Minerva gave him another sidelong look.

"Right," the Human said doubtfully. "Anyway, it was about then that I—fortunately, you know—started to get slightly suspicious. About who he was and his intentions, you know?" There was a slight pause as Minerva glanced towards Charlotte's door and frowned, sadness lingering in her eyes. "Of course, I made my excuses and left after that. It was only after I had gotten back to my flat and had woken up the next day that I realized where I'd recognized that...oil-like hair."

"Oily idiot," Ranboo said under his breath, and Tommy smirked against the back of his hand.

"Chroma," Minerva said nervously, glancing around as if the Avian was going to pop out of nowhere. "Of course, it was him. So I made my claim, and here we are...three months later." She said that last part bitterly.

"Sorry, ma'am," Ranboo said. "It was just a sighting, though—we do have a war to worry about."

"Yes, of course," the Human said faintly.

"Right, well, that seems about correct," Techno said, starting to stand up.

"Do you want to see Charlotte?" Minerva said suddenly. "She wanted to be a pilot...yes, yes, she did." Tommy tilted his head.

"We're on a bit of a time crunch—" Techno started. They were on no such thing.

"No, no, really!" Minerva said, almost desperately. "I insist!"

"Okay, ma'am," Ranboo said placatingly.

"Ranboo—" Techno started, and then blinked. "I, uh, mean...Concord."

Minerva either wasn't paying attention to Techno's line or wasn't surprised. "Come, come," she said, suddenly looking relieved and worried. Tommy fingered the knife in his pocket unsteadily. Clearly, this woman's daughter wasn't the only one that needed medical help.

He sort of felt bad for the half Merling, half Human daughter that Minerva had. Clearly, it was causing all sorts of medical issues with the poor girl. Glancing at Techno, Tommy wondered if the half-Piglin was lucky or if Piglins and Felines were just compatible. Of course, he wasn't going to ask. Techno would either glare at him, hit him 'cross the back of his head, or...

His thoughts trailed off as he entered the room, nearly bumping into Ranboo, who had gone first. "Move out of the fuckin' way, boob boy," he grumbled good-naturedly, opening his mouth once more to make some sort of tall giraffe joke.

It died in his mouth when he saw the occupant—and he wasn't speaking of the teenaged girl lying on the hospital bed, an IV in her arm and her face pale and grey—not dead, but cold.

A man stood by her bed, staring down at her. He'd looked up when the four of them had entered the room, a slight grin on his face that Tommy was eerily familiar with.

No, *no*.

No.

Tommy stared into the terrifying eyes of Chroma, and he saw himself, and he saw his past, and he saw the lines of gravestones the Avian had caused. Terrible anger filled him—anger and fear and hate.

He drew his knife out but paused slightly when he saw the phaser in Chroma's hand, the Avian having hidden it below eye-level.

More fear. Endless fear.

Pogtopia all over again.

"I'm so sorry," Minerva breathed out, and Tommy spun, curse words in his throat and anger in his voice, only to see some sort of taser in her hand. She pressed the button before Tommy could react, and Techno, who'd drawn his phaser at Chroma and was right about to press the button—Techno fell.

Techno, who hadn't been expecting an attack from the back. Minerva, who'd betrayed them.

Tommy choked on air he didn't have as Ranboo let out a scared crooning noise, his eyes wide and scared. Purple particles flickered into existence as the Enderian gathered his strength to teleport.

"Don't," Chroma said—and damned it all, Tommy paused. Tommy paused, and Ranboo paused because they were still used to listening to that fucking bitch even after all these years. "Don't do it," he said. "I know you've never been powerful enough to teleport yourself *and* two other people. You move, and I'll shoot the one you leave behind *and* the girl in the bed."

"That wasn't part of the deal—" Minerva screeched in a high voice, and Tommy *almost* felt bad for her. Then again, she'd shot Techno. So he actually hated her.

"Shut up," Chroma growled in a low voice, his chromatic hair moving as he turned to look at the tallest occupant of the room. "Don't fucking teleport, *boy*. You'll leave them to die."

"Just go," Tommy yelled. "Take Techno and *go*!"

Ranboo shook his head. "I—I can't leave you behind," he said in a low voice. "I can't leave you behind to die."

"He won't kill me," Tommy said.

"Will I?" Chroma said in a dangerous voice, and Tommy's mind was screaming *danger! Danger! Danger!* but the knife in his hand wasn't moving, and then his mind screamed, *family! Family! Family!* and he didn't know what to feel. "Are you willing to take that risk, boy?"

Ranboo blinked once. Opened his mouth.

"Go," Tommy snarled, shaking the false thoughts aside and raising his knife higher. It looked smaller than usual—pink metal and steel in between sweating, shaking fingers. "*Go.*"

"I cannot leave you again," Ranboo said. "I can't."

"Please just go," Tommy whispered. "Please."

"I can't," Ranboo said stubbornly. Techno was a silent crumpled heap on the ground. "I can't leave you again, Tommy. You have to—you have to understand."

"Ah, friendship," Chroma said, a horrifying smirk on his face. "It was the downfall of many."

"You're a horrible person," Tommy spat. "You murdered—"

"—murdered it a strong word, Tommy," Chroma interrupted.

"Don't fucking call me that."

"Are we not family, Tommy?" Chroma said, tilting his head slightly, an unreadable expression upon his face.

"We are not," he choked out, and Ranboo's eyes kept darting between Techno, Tommy, and Chroma, horrific fear written on the Enderians' face. The purple particles lingered in the air, but

there were not nearly enough for Ranboo to teleport, and no more were coming. "We are not *family*."

"We have a *bond*, Tommy," Chroma said, and oh, how Tommy wished he would stop saying his name like it *meant* something.

"I BROKE IT!" he screamed, and there were tears on his face, and the knife was clenched uselessly in his hand—he'd brought a knife to a gunfight. "I broke it, and I fucking hoped you'd die when I did, but it was incomplete and *forced*, and you are nothing but a cockroach. Unwanted." He was not—they were not *family*. He *had* a family.

"How...creative," Chroma said, not seeming bothered by the screeching in the slightest. Tommy glanced around the room, desperately searching for a way out. "Now, now. None of that. You won't escape from me again."

"Last I checked, weren't you the one that ran?" Ranboo said in a high-pitched voice.

"Ah, Ranboo," Chroma said, and the Enderian winced at the name-drop. "You certainly have grown a pair in the years since we've last met."

"You sent me to die," the Enderian said.

"Technically, I didn't," Chroma said. "You escaped."

"*All of the other Enderians died*," Ranboo hissed, his eyes bright and deadly dangerous. "You would have killed me eventually, regardless of whether my name was on the first few lists or not. And—and my *friends*—"

"—were not strong enough anyway," Chroma shrugged.

"Oh, you stupid bitch," Tommy snarled, and maybe if he could *delay-delay-delay*, someone would hear them and find them. "If you had lost some of your horrible *pride* and manned up and told someone, they would have helped—"

Chroma's eyes flashed, and Tommy's traitorous tongue fell silent in his mouth. "Listen here, *boy*," he said in a low voice, stepping around Charlotte's bed, and Tommy was suddenly twelve years old and *afraid-afraid-afraid*. "You had no idea what I was working on—what I *lost* when that colony fell. A decades' worth of work—for nothing!"

"THREE THOUSAND LIVES WERE LOST!" he screamed, and his hot tears dripped onto the floor, and his vision was blurry, and he didn't want to be here—oh, this was some horrible nightmare, it *was*—"CHILDREN! CHILDREN, YOU FUCKER! BECAUSE OF YOU! BECAUSE. OF. YOU."

"A small loss compared—"

"HAVE YOU NO SENSE FOR THE LOST?" Tommy howled, and he already knew the answer as he grasped for desperate strings, trying to block the air from Chroma's throat—but the other Avian was older, far older, and caught on far before he could succeed.

Ranboo choked on air he didn't have, and Tommy screamed, raising his knife and taking a single step forward.

"Stop," Chroma said, and Tommy *stopped*, five feet from Chroma and his knife raised in the air, ready to gut the Avian where he stood. Ranboo gasped for air and fell to his knees, his hand hitting the tiled floor inches from Technoblade's unconscious head, the other clutching at his throat—as if he could work the lungs that refused to flutter. "Another step and I stop his heart." Tommy did not move, glancing at Ranboo, who was beginning to turn a pale shade, the last of his purple particles gone as he lost concentration. "Always been weak for your friends, hmm?"

"Please don't," Tommy said, and he felt broken—spread thin, like a bit of butter over too much bread. As if he'd aged a hundred years and was trying to walk down a staircase. Tired. He was spiraling; he knew this—seconds from a panic attack he couldn't afford to have. "Please don't, Chroma."

"Wow, what a change of words," Chroma said, bright eyes filled with victory, his mouth twisting into a proud smirk. "Just seconds ago, you were willing to murder me." Ranboo choked further, spit dripping down his monochromatic jaw. He was a horrible shade of grey, now—close to convulsing, close to *death*. "I've always been stronger than you, Tommy—you know that."

"Please," Tommy said, trembling in this horrible nightmare that was *real*, and he knew he was reaching a new low by begging to the Avian that had watched as his best friends had been executed, but...

Chroma tilted his head. "But that's not fun, is it?" he said, maybe to himself. "Pity your hotheaded Human friend isn't here. The party isn't quite full." He shook his head. "I suppose it wouldn't be as fun with only one..."

Ranboo drowned in fresh air as he collapsed on his chest, and Tommy nearly sobbed in relief as he watched his friend take in a breath of air. Breathing, breathing, *breathing*—no still chest, no empty eyes. Breathing. He told himself that Ranboo's heart was still beating, and he tried not to panic, tried not to reach for Chroma's beating heart and stop it—it wouldn't work; because the other Avian was better, more experienced, and then Ranboo would truly die.

"You monster," Tommy whispered, from where he stood, like a statue—from where Ranboo was bent over, coughing and gasping—from where Technoblade lay slumped on the ground, in an unwilling sleep, dreaming unwanted dreams.

"Is that what I am to you, Tommy?" Chroma said, and his eyes were sad—good, he fucking *deserved* that. "Is that all I am?"

"Yes," he said, and he meant it.

"We are both Avians, Tommy," Chroma said. "That is what we are. We share the same biology, the same history."

"Two sides of history," he corrected, glaring at the other. "One of us is the villain in this story."

Chroma hummed, uncaring as he stepped closer. Tommy leaned away from the Avian slightly as the taller bent down to stare at his face. "We are few and far between," he said, hissing slightly. Tommy didn't like the mania hidden in his eyes. Tommy didn't like anything about Chroma. "We should stand together against the world."

"I am nothing like you," he said resolutely. "I did not murder children."

"Did you not?" Chroma asked, arching an eyebrow. "I could've sworn that you created that hand signal—you said so in your little *interview*." Tommy felt his breaths quicken, for he had no response to that. "It was because of you they died."

"It was your bullets that flew," Ranboo choked out from the floor, when Tommy could not open his mouth to respond. "It was your order given."

"Because of him," Chroma said, glancing at Tommy as he looked at Ranboo, still on the floor, disgust flashing across his features. "Because of him." He looked up, over Tommy's shoulder. Ranboo gave a small cry of warning.

Then there was pain, and nothing at all.

"Relax, Purpled," Wilbur said, as he stared through a viewport at the small medical floating through endless space. "They checked in fifty—" He checked his datapad. "Fifty-seven minutes ago."

Purpled snorted, fixing his mask as it slipped down under his nose. He felt like shit, but slightly better shit than he had that morning. "Every time I leave Tommy alone, something goes wrong," he said.

"He has Techno and Ranboo," Phil said kindly. "He is hardly alone."

Purpled didn't reply to that, continuing to stare at the medical station. "Still," he said. "There's something in my chest that says something is about to go wrong."

"That's called paranoia," Tubbo said helpfully, looking up from his datapad—Dream let out a loud curse; he must've just lost a game of *DUAL* against the Shulker. "You should get that checked out."

"My paranoia has always come from a reliant source," he muttered, squinting at the *Benecia*. "Fuck this. I wish I wasn't sick. I don't like not knowing things."

"We're literally watching the station," Phil pointed out. "We're in *Galactic Rebellion* space, for heaven's sake. You can relax. Go sit down. Beat Dream's ass in *DUAL*."

"No," Purpled said stubbornly.

Stubbornness had always been his downfall.

Phil sighed but left his side to return to the captain's seat as he squinted at papers and missions done by other ships. Somewhere in there, Purpled knew that Chroma's name floated around—somewhere. Any other day, he'd love to read the paperwork and find out *mor* —more knowledge for grasping fingers, more knowledge in his head. Any other day.

For now, he returned his attention to the medical station and waited.

Tommy and Ranboo and Techno would return.

A spike of pain lanced through Valkyrae's head as she was grabbing her coffee and heading across the dining hall. She dropped it with a small gasp, pressing her palm to her forehead as the ceramic cup shattered against the floor.

The pain faded.

Her uneasiness rose.

"You okay, Rae?" Sykkuno said as she bent down to begin to gather the shards.

"Yeah," she said, and sure, it was a lie. "Just a small headache. I might go lie down, if that's okay?"

"Of course," Sykkuno said, smiling at her, and a small bit of friend-love pushed its way through their bond. She smiled, despite the lingering pain and uneasiness. "No problem. I'll tell Toast and Corpse."

As Rae walked off, throwing the broken ceramic shards out, she couldn't help but feel like she was missing something. Or someone.

The second light in her head was bright and young—the youngest of their race, and a boy that Rae had a soft spot for.

"Tommy?" she whispered, stopping to lean against the wall as she turned her body towards his location—somewhere, light-years away. "Tommy, are you okay?"

The boy did not answer.

Green and Red and Blue

"No matter who it is, anyone can be

redeemed. Well...

...almost anyone."

- Ranboo

He woke up in a room of pale metal and cold air, panting for breath.

"Nice to see you in the wakin' world, kid," Techno said, his slow drawl of words making Tommy turn to look at him sharply. The half-Piglin was chained to the wall made of dark metal, and his wrists were stained with dried blood from tugging at the manacles—to no avail, of course.

Tommy stood up, blood rushing to his head and making him stumble as he gasped and nearly fell, terror staining his thoughts as he looked frantically around for—*there*—

Ranboo was sitting in a corner, unchained, his knees drawn to his chest as he stared balefully at Tommy. "Hey," he whispered.

"Thank fucking God," Tommy croaked out, sinking to the floor, his knees slightly bent as he rubbed at his forehead. "I thought—maybe..." he trailed off, unable to finish his sentence.

"No," Ranboo said, tilting his head slightly. "Not yet, anyway."

"Blasted cuffs," Techno grumbled, tugging at them. Tommy winced as he saw a thin tendril of dark blood—darker than his, darker than Humans'—trail down Techno's forearm. "We were transported on a spaceship somewhere," he added, when he couldn't break the cuffs, even with his increased

strength. "I woke up partway through that. Knocked out, again, of course, but not before I felt the hum of an engine."

"Why didn't the *L'manburg* find us?" Tommy whispered, staring at the cold metal ground.

"Either Chroma is working with the *Benecia*, or he stole a medical freighter," Techno said. "It's a pity that you and Ranboo are no longer wearing your trackers."

"I didn't..." Tommy swallowed. "I didn't think it was any more dangerous than Kinoko. Less, even—it's a station floating in space! There's nowhere to fucking go." He slammed his hand on the ground, wincing at the stinging pain.

"Hey, it's okay, Tommy," Techno assured him. "It's not your fault."

"Yeah, it is," he whispered. "I shouldn't have accepted this mission. I should never have made you come."

"I don't know if you knew this, Tommy," Ranboo said, his lips cracking as he twisted his lips in the embodiment of a broken smile. "But you can rarely make me do anything that I don't already want to do. I chose to come. I wanted the same revenge we all wish for."

"Can you—" he started.

"No," Ranboo said, cutting him off. "Or, ah, not out of the room, anyway. The liquid they gave me—or what little they could force down my throat—I can't teleport further than, ah, five feet. And certainly not through any walls."

Tommy slumped against the floor. "Fuck this," he said miserably.

"Don't worry," Techno told him, which was *incredibly* helpful in this stressful situation. "In about—six hours, I think, the *L'manburg* should realize we're missing. It'll take Wilbur about fifteen minutes to obtain a warrant to search the medical station, and when they find Minerva and not

us...well, their questions will have answers eventually." He raised an eyebrow when Tommy winced. "You oppose these methods."

"You speak of torture," he croaked out.

"I do no such thing," Techno said stiffly. "Minerva does not seem like a very resolute female. Under Philza's harsh questioning..." he shrugged. "Well, who knows."

"I feel somewhat mollified," Tommy grumbled. "*Somewhat.*"

"I'm scared," Ranboo voiced aloud, saying what they could not. Tommy scooted back until he was sitting against the cold wall next to the Enderian boy. "Is it okay to be scared?"

"Of course it is," Tommy said soothingly, cracking a bitter smile. "I'm scared out of my fucking mind right now. I'm *terrified*. I'm scared for—for you and Techno, and I'm scared for myself, and I'm scared of Chroma." He reached out and placed a gentle hand on Ranboo's forearm, tilting his head at the baleful eyes of the Enderian. "It's okay to be scared."

"Not in the eyes of my people," Techno grunted out. Tommy flashed him a wicked glare, and the half-Piglin put his hands up in mock defeat. "Okay, okay. Fine. Whatever. I was just sayin'." He sighed. "Being brave isn't the absence of fear. Being brave is havin' that fear but findin' a way through it." Techno shrugged, his chains rattling as his shoulders shifted. "Now, we can either sit here and wait for rescue, or one of you can come over here and try to get my chains off."

Turned out, the chains wouldn't come off. According to one of Ranboo's mumblings that Tommy overheard, they were made of netherite—which meant that no amount of pulling at it would break it. Tommy even suggested that Ranboo take Techno's hand and teleport him out, but that didn't work either, which surprised just about everyone.

"It's sort of cool," the Enderian said, bent over, his hands on his knees as he panted for air—the small teleport had taken a lot out of him because of the drug. "Y'know? Ah, I think Tubbo would have liked to study it."

"Study it later," Techno gritted out, and Tommy reached out and grabbed the half-Piglin's wrist to stop him as another trickle of blood rolled down his arm when he tugged at the chains.

"Don't do that," Tommy said. "It won't do anything."

Techno glared at him, but Tommy raised an eyebrow, and the glare softened into a frown not directed at him. "What if—"

Techno didn't get the chance to finish his train of thought because the door clicked open to reveal three guards, two with phasers out and the center one with a tray that contained a slab of some unknown red meat and a single glass of water.

Nobody in the room spoke. Tommy traced the lines of the phasers and found that one was pointed at Techno, who was essentially immobilized, and the other was at him.

"One movement and someone dies," the center one barked, and Tommy flinched slightly, drawing up imaginary wings and hiding behind them. The center guard—Blazeborn, he was Blazeborn, based on the fiery orange eyes—set the tray down on the floor and motioned to his comrades, who slowly backed out.

The door clicked shut, and Tommy heard it lock once more.

"Well, shit," he said.

"That's one way to say what a disaster this is," Ranboo said amicably as Tommy stepped forward and knelt by the tray.

"Should've taken them out," Techno grumbled.

Tommy glared at the half-Piglin as he prodded at the tray. "With what? My *airbending* powers? I don't know if you noticed, but I can't stop bullets."

"Not for lack of trying," Ranboo muttered, eyeing the tray disdainfully.

"You can stop hearts, though," Techno said.

Tommy threw up his hands. "Not on *command*," he grouched. "And it's not like you can practice it."

"Not with that attitude."

"Shut up, Technoblade," he said sharply because his chest hurt, and he kept thinking *Chroma, Chroma, Chroma*, and he remembered stopping the hearts of the Arachnids aboard the warship—and Techno, hearing the warning in his tone, went silent.

Ranboo, fortunately, changed the subject. "There's literally one glass of water," he complained.

"You can have it," Techno said instantly.

Ranboo sneered. "I'm an Enderian. I can't drink that shit."

Techno blinked. "Oh. Yeah."

"Stop trying to be a martyr," Tommy said, picking up the tray and bringing it over to the half-Piglin, who honestly looked like a mess—his braid was fucked up, and strands were out of place, and a corner of one of his tusks were chipped. He set the tray down by where Techno sat, pushing it towards the half-Piglin. "Eat it. If you really want, I'll take the water."

"I—I can't do that," Techno said, blinking stupidly. "You—you're kids, I can't just take food meant for all three of us—"

"I can't drink water, and there isn't any chorus fruit," Ranboo cut across him. "And Tommy can't eat meat." There was a silence as all three of them cast their gazes across the unknown—but definitely some form of animal—meat. "Someone has to eat. Someone has to keep up their strength. I'm not going to lose my memories again just because my stomach is growling." There was a finality in his words.

Tommy tilted his head and bumped against Ranboo's shoulder comfortingly. "Eat the food, Technoblade," he said warily, ignoring the pit in his stomach as he took the glass of water with shaking hands, gulping it half down. "Someone has to be strong."

"You're kids," Techno said weakly.

"Don't not eat because of what we are," Tommy said sharply. "Because of rebellion." He crossed his arms and stared at the door, Ranboo to his left and Techno, in chains, to his right. He pretended that he wasn't hungry. He pretended a lot of things nowadays. "I've starved before."

"Right," Ranboo said, a slight shakiness in his voice, resolute though it was. "Ah, right. It's been less than six hours, Techno." A bitter laugh left his lips. "It can get worse than this."

"...of course," Techno said, a touch tenderly, as one of his ears twitched unhappily. He reached forward and inhaled the food, glancing sheepishly at Tommy and Ranboo, both of whom were staring at the door.

"I wish Tubbo was here," Ranboo said after Techno had pushed the tray away and downed the quarter bit of water that Tommy had left in the cup. They both pretended they didn't notice the stains of meat grease left behind by Techno's trailing claws as he surreptitiously wiped his fingers clean from food.

"If Tubbo were here, we would've been out yesterday," Tommy said, with all the horrifying amusement he could muster. "He would've whipped out, like—nukes or some shit from his pocket dimension."

"Please," Techno snorted. "He doesn't have nukes."

"Yes he does," Ranboo and Tommy said in unison. Surprise and wariness flashed across Techno's face—Tubbo, they all knew, was not someone to be messed with, nor take lightly.

"He has nuclear codes," Ranboo said, a touch too pridefully if Tommy thought hard about it.

"Don't be *proud* of him," Techno hissed. "Phil should know that! At worst, Dream, because technically he's the Chief Tactical Officer!"

"He knows them," Ranboo said, bobbing his head. Tommy snorted as he remembered the numbers that Tubbo would excitedly recite to scare Ranboo into doing something. Usually the threats involved the bombing of major cities and stations. Tommy wasn't quite sure if Tubbo was joking. "He knows a lot of things."

"Kid's too smart for his own good," Techno said, but there was a fondness in his voice. "He's too young to be a lieutenant."

Before Tommy could explain what Techno actually meant—that blunt statement, in itself, conveyed little—Ranboo jumped to his *husband's* defense.

"You think he doesn't deserve it?" the Enderian said sharply, eyes flashing.

"No," Techno said. "No, of course not. He's smart. We love having him. But Ranboo, you gotta understand—" he cut himself off as he reached up a manacled hand to rub at the sweat on his brow. "—duty is heavier than a mountain," he said finally. "Duty makes us do things well, but love makes us do them beautifully. We love Tubbo. Tubbo loves us. But—in the end, he's a kid. If I think too hard about it, I could admit that he's technically a child soldier." His eyes flicked to Tommy, and he is reminded of a conversation on a street under a setting sun, a red-filled sky. "That Tommy and Lani and Drista are on their paths to becoming ones as well."

"Drista's already a child soldier," he muttered.

Techno swung his head to look at him curiously. "What?"

Tommy flushed. "Nothing," he said.

Techno raised an eyebrow but let it slide. "You're a nurse, Ranboo," he said. "Another child soldier, of sorts."

"We're not children," Tommy snapped, and Ranboo glanced away like he was unhappy or ashamed or something. "Not anymore. Not after everything."

"No," Techno said. "You're not. But you deserve to be."

Tommy didn't know how to respond to that.

It would be later, after everything was over, that he would mull over what the half-Piglin had said and agree.

A hundred and twenty minutes before the twelve hours were up, Chroma entered the room. He was alone, flanked by no guards, and none trailed in after the door clicked shut. Tommy suddenly missed his knife as he glanced towards the phaser in the Avian's holster, and a stinging sensation in his throat built up.

Had Chroma destroyed it?

Broken it—one of the first gifts he'd ever gotten?

"Not so talkative now, are you?" Chroma said, and he was staring directly at Tommy as he spoke.

Tommy managed to keep himself from flipping the fucker off—

—because Chroma was one step from an actual psychopath, one step from slipping off into insanity. He'd ordered his men to fire on innocent children who could have been *saved*—Tommy did not doubt that he'd fire on one of them if need be.

His hatred burned in his heart like fire from the deepest smelting pits—*hate, hate, hate* his mind chanted, *revenge*—revenge for those he'd lost all those years ago.

Revenge for an Elytrian with a high-pitched laugh and purple-grey wings that he could snap in shut to fly through self-made rings of wood.

Revenge for a Phantom whose eyes glittered green and white and whose smile lit up even the darkest of days and whose dance had made Tommy cringe and smile into the hand that covered his mouth as he rolled his eyes.

Revenge for a Feline girl whose words had pierced the stubbornest of hearts, whose voice had led the rebellion, whose hands covered his on the strings of a violin, whose quietness—but not—whose love had made them take that one more step; made them survive that one more day.

A warm hand touched his wrist, and Tommy let out a breath as he made brief eye contact with eyes of red and green. Slowly, one white-knuckled finger at a time, he unclenched his fists.

"Perhaps you've finally learned to keep your foolish—" Tommy winced, and Chroma noticed, his grin widening ever so slightly, a dark inclination filling his eyes. "—tongue in your mouth, *boy*." Blood filled his mouth, dark and rusty—he'd bitten his lip. "Maybe I'll have to learn a thing or two from the people of the *L'manburg*. They've taught him more than I ever could in these few months than I did in three years."

"Shut up," Ranboo bit out as Tommy stared at Chroma, unable to utter a sound. Tears were trailing down his face. Crying. He was crying. "Shut. up."

"And you, dear boy," Chroma said, turning to him with a simpering sort of horrible grin. "You've finally grown a *spine*. How wonderful."

"He's worse than all the stories I've ever heard," Techno muttered under his breath.

Chroma paused, and Tommy desperately wanted to scream at Techno not to draw his attention. But he couldn't.

And so he didn't.

"What was that?" the Avian asked in a faux-careful voice. "I could've sworn a...pig was speaking."

"I'm half-Feline, you insufferable parrot," Technoblade said, and Tommy was surprised that he could keep his calm through such a racist insult.

Chroma eyed him. "Oh, that's right," he said. "Didn't the Galactic Rebellion only consider your ancestors *people* a decade ago?"

"Oh, that's right," Techno shot back, a curling tone of disdain and taunt. "Aren't you that Avian that destroyed three thousand, two hundred, and seventy children's lives out of sheer self-worship?"

Chroma's eyes flashed, and Tommy reached out and grabbed Techno's wrist in something akin to a warning. Techno snorted softly—and in Tommy's deepest nightmares, this moment was right here. Right now.

Instead, the Avian merely snorted in disgust and shook his head. He met Tommy's eyes. "Tommy," he said, carefully and clearly. "Come here."

"*Don't*," Ranboo said, catching Tommy's hand as he took a single terrifying step towards the Avian.

Chroma rolled his eyes and reached for the phaser at his belt. Tommy's heart leaped in his throat, and without thinking, he moved a single step in front of Ranboo. "Don't be silly, boy," the Avian snorted. "I'll rephrase my sentence. Come here, or I'll shoot one of your friends."

"You can't," Tommy whispered, and it was more of an internal mumble escaped.

"I can," Chroma said, leveling that horrible weapon at Techno's head. "And I will. Come. Here."

Both his friends were silent. Ranboo had a scared, sad expression on his face, and Techno, quiet as he was, looked dreadfully angry. Tommy took a deep breath and walked towards Chroma.

He stopped when he was two arms' lengths away, and Chroma smiled at him, holstering his gun.

Tommy didn't like that smile. It brought back bad memories.

"It took so long to find you, dear," the Avian said, and Tommy trembled with pent-up rage and resentment and *fear*—so much fear. "You broke our bond."

"We were never anything," he choked out, and he knew that the two behind him were bewildered—Avian bonds were a secretive thing, and Lani and Drista, having found out on Icarus-45HB, never told anyone.

"Are you sure about that one, Tommy?" Chroma said calmly. Oily. His hair was oily, just like him—he had to remember that. Tommy had to get past the *feelings*—old, old feelings from another place that told him Chroma was good—that told him Chroma could be his family. Because Chroma could not, and would never be, his family. Ever.

Not what after he'd done.

"I broke it," he said, his lips curling back over his teeth. "I broke it, and I didn't die because I never accepted it. Because you forced it on me."

"You needed it," Chroma said. "After your father died. I saved your life."

"YOU RUINED MY LIFE!" he said, exploding in a burst of emotion akin to exploding rockets in a dark sky. "YOU KILLED MY FRIENDS!"

"Oh, Tommy," Chroma said, his eyes flashing ever so slightly. "I would never hurt you."

LIE, LIE, LIE—

"That's a fuckin' falsification," Techno spat out when Tommy didn't speak, unable to find the words to roll off his tongue. Unable to find anything at all. Lost, lost at sea, like a drowning animal reaching for anything to float.

"Quiet, pig, or I'll plant a bullet between your eyes," Chroma said, still calm—or acting it. "Tommy." No, he couldn't. "Tommy, look at me."

No, no.

He wouldn't.

No—

Slowly, unwillingly, his gaze flitted up to meet Chroma's. A flash of victory entered the Avian's eyes—and then Tommy shrieked as he felt an old shattered bond snap at him like whiplash, forming—

—*NO*.

He screamed at the top of his lungs as he tried to force Chroma out and *couldn't* and Techno shouted something and Ranboo shrieked loudly and he screamed and screamed and screamed and then he reached out to the one person that could shield him from something *he did not want*—

Valkyrae.

She felt it first. A trickle of something—something new, and she smiled, thinking that Tommy had found something that caused him immense joy.

She realized, after a few seconds of pausing in the middle of the hallway, that it wasn't a *good* kind of new. More like the kind of new that forced itself on you when you wanted it least.

They were so far apart and she couldn't feed him emotions—and, supposedly, nor could he to her, but she felt a burst of pain that made her stumble and cry out with pain. Sykkuno was in her head almost instantly, sending her *worry-love-relief-question*, but she put a hand on her forehead and concentrated solely on what was causing Tommy so much pain.

It was like reaching for a branch that didn't exist. Like taking the step off a staircase to another step twenty feet away. It wasn't possible, by any means.

But Rae was an Avian.

And Avians were designed to do the impossible. Avians *were* the impossible. Many things about her life had been the impossible—survival, bonding, new happiness. What was another branch in a world full of trees?

She grabbed onto Sykkuno's mind and wordlessly asked him to grant her mental strength, and Sykkuno, bless him, gave it to her without any more inquiries.

What's wrong? she wanted to ask Tommy; wanted to gather the youngest of their race up in her arms and flood his dark-shadowy head with *love-affection-family*.

But she couldn't ask him that.

She couldn't say anything.

Reaching far enough—reaching with everything she had, every inkling of her mind that she had, and then some, she could sense that he wanted help, wanted a shield from something that was dark and crawling, even from *here*, so many light years away—she hated to think about what psychic attack Tommy was undergoing to be able to call her from here.

Of who or what could possibly be leading such an attack.

Valkyrae could not talk to Tommy. She could not support him emotionally or give him affection in the way that the Avian in her wanted to do.

But he was reaching for her, like a baby bird to its parent, and so she used Sykkuno's strength and gathered him up in her mental arms, turning her back on the sludgy mess that was trying to—trying to form a *bond* with the little Avian.

She peered over her non-physical shoulder and looked that *thing* in the face—if it even had a face—and she said *no*—or rather, she screamed it, as loud as she could across their bond and into Tommy's head—and maybe she screamed through her physical mouth, who knew—and she raised violent shields of gold and she coaxed the monster from Tommy's mind.

And when it was done, and when she was sure it had retreated—even for now—she gathered the broken-seeming mind of Tommy in her less-than-physical arms and she sang the songs of their people.

Even from across the universe.

"Incoming transmission from the *Mira*," Wilbur said, surprise in his voice.

Tubbo looked up from his desk, where he'd been doing an old Terran crossword puzzle. "Huh?" he asked, confused, noting the identical confused sounds coming from the throats of the other members of the bridge crew. "Aren't they, like, twenty light-years away?"

Wilbur frowned, and Dream stood up walked over. The Phantom pointed at something on his screen and said something in a low voice.

"They're less than one," Dream said, blinking in surprise. "What—how? Their warp engines must have nearly deteriorated—three hours again they checked in with Command—they were fourteen light-years away!"

"Accept the transmission, Wil," Phil said.

"Gotcha, Captain," the Phantom said, looking slightly disturbed. Tubbo quietly slid away his crossword puzzle, crossing his hands as he prepared to glance up towards the transmission screen. If he took a glance out the port window to look at the *Benecia*, nobody knew.

It was Toast, Human and all, hair longer than it'd ever been, a small black earring in his right ear.

"Captain," Toast said to Phil.

"Admi—I mean, Captain," Phil said, smiling a bit at the mess up.

Toast inclined his head slightly. "There's been an...incident," he said carefully.

"No shit," Dream said, scowling. "You've gone thirteen and a half light-years in less than three hours!"

"Yes, we'll have to get our cores replaced at a Galactic Rebellion Station," Toast said, waving it off. Tubbo wondered if he didn't care because he was rich—because warp cores were damn expensive—or because there were more significant problems. "Rae and Sykkuno have been...out."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tubbo found himself asking. Technically not how he was supposed to speak to his superiors, but if they were contacting the *L'manburg* about it...

Wilbur clearly had the same thought because he cursed and turned back to his desk, typing furiously on his keyboard. "Commander Technoblade, this is the *L'manburg*; please come in."

"Mate—" Phil started.

"Philza," Toast said, and Phil fell silent—whether that was out of differential habit or because of Toast's tone, Tubbo didn't know. "I've been told that my Chief Security Officer has a sort of...bond...thing...with Ensign Tommy."

A what?

"I wasn't aware of that," Phil said, as calm as he possibly could. Because if Rae had—

"It's not like Elytrian bonds," Toast said, looking wary. "Nothing like that, I've been told. But—and I know I don't have the clearance—where is Tommy? Rae collapsed in the hallway, and Tina found her on the way to the bathroom—and she was screaming, and then she screamed his name—or his nickname, mind—"

"FUCK!" Wilbur shouted, silencing Toast as he slammed his hand down on the controls.

"Wilbur Soot!" Phil shouted, looking angry and startling Tubbo in his boots. "If you please!"

"They're gone!" Wilbur wailed. "I contacted the *Benecia* and they searched the rooms and arrested the woman—Monica or whatever—and they're gone!"

Silence—horrific, terrifying silence—filled the room. Phil looked like he didn't have any air anymore.

Techno's seat was awfully empty.

Dream looked sick.

"Ranboo," Tubbo whispered, a phaser appearing in his hand.

"Put that down," Phil told him sharply. "Before you kill someone."

"But—" he started.

"It's against regulation, but I'll overlook it if you put it down," the Elytrian said, clearly pained, through gritted teeth. "They're not on the station anymore, probably—but we'll do a sweep, just to double-check."

"Rae and Sykkuno are both unconscious and show no signs of waking," Toast added. His face softened ever so slightly. "But if it means anything, Rae is humming tunes under her breath, even while unconscious. Child songs. She's happy—or happy enough. So maybe Tommy's not dead. Maybe *they're* not dead."

"Yet," Dream muttered under his breath, and even as Phil scowled at him, the fear on his face portrayed everything.

Ranboo, Tubbo thought, even as he lowered the gun.

His vision cleared, the last of Rae's songs disappearing from his head. He was on his knees, gasping, and the latest shouting of Techno's mostly-empty threats had just vanished into the air. Tommy gasped, and the half-Piglin fell silent, making a worried sound in his throat.

"Interesting," Chroma said, but despite the calmness that he outwardly portrayed, calamity raged in his eyes. "*Interesting*."

"I'm sorry," Tommy choked out, and he didn't mean that; he *didn't*, but the words came out anyway.

"Found yourself another family, boy?" Chroma snarled at him. "Fancied yourself part of another *flock*?"

"They're better than you'll ever be," he spat, his legs shaking as he rose to his feet.

"They are *nothing* compared to me," Chroma said, eyes flashing.

"They are everything," he insisted—and he believed that. He did.

"Is that so?" Chroma said softly, and Tommy stilled.

"No—" he said. "Please don't—"

Techno choked. Choked on nothing. Tommy spun to see the half-Piglin's face, a look of surprise and pain on it as he struggled to breathe.

A mistake.

Not again.

"What did I say about begging, Tommy?" Chroma whispered.

"Not to do it," he said, as collected as he could, even as tears began to trace their standard lines down his face. "Please—please don't do this."

"Why shouldn't I?" Chroma said, gleeful and unyielding. Tommy could hear Techno choking and Ranboo making warbling sounds of unsureness.

"Please," he said. "Anything."

Chroma stared at him. Tommy put all the pleading he could into his tearful eyes—because he could do nothing *but* beg. Even as Techno choked on air that didn't exist, dying behind him.

"Fine," Chroma sighed.

Tommy breathed a sigh of relief, slumping. Techno inhaled sharply with him.

An expression of hate flashed Chroma's face, and because Tommy wasn't prepared—because he wasn't *good enough*—because no matter how many times he'd practiced with Drista, he wasn't enough—

He pulled the trigger.

A bullet flashed over his shoulder, and Tommy screamed, spinning towards its target—towards one of the people he'd come to call his *brother*, his family—

Techno's eyes were blown wide as he attempted to move out of the way and failed because of the chains—for the bullet moving towards his skull that he couldn't get out of the way of—

He was going to die.

Except—

Purple particles in the air.

Bright green and blood-red eyes met sea-blue, and Tommy locked eyes with Ranboo, who was not where he'd been; not where he should be—because the foolish Enderian had *teleported* in front of Technoblade, teleported in front of *his* family—but Ranboo *was* his family—

Ranboo died.

There was no other way to say it. The bullet had gone straight into his dirty suit and left a trickle of blood and smoke in its wake.

Ranboo died as surely as Snifferish and Puffy and Sam and Foolish and Grian and Alyssa had because Ranboo was mortal, and all mortals died.

Because Ranboo had taken a bullet meant for Techno straight through his heart. Ranboo had taken a bullet that would have connected with Techno's skull and killed the commander as surely as it'd done him.

The word *sacrifice* hung in the air, heavy and dark, even as Tommy's mouth opened, screaming a name that he couldn't quite hear through the ringing in his temple.

Ranboo didn't get crumbling tears and final gestures as Alyssa and Grian and Foolish had.

Ranboo didn't get the warmth that Sam and Puffy had when they'd hugged as they'd died, even as a fiery explosion filled their ship.

Ranboo didn't get the dying words that Sniff had in Tommy's arms aboard the *U.S.S Midway*.

Ranboo didn't get anything. Ranboo didn't get anything but one final look into Tommy's eyes.

Ranboo died.

Something in Tommy died alongside him.

The Sick Part Of Your Mind

Chapter Notes

I know you guys loved the content of that other chapter so much, so here's more angst.

"He's the villain...

...in the history books...

...but sometimes the villains win."

- c!Tommy, *The Dream SMP*

Technoblade roared something undiscernable in the ringing that reverberated around in Tommy's ears. Ignoring Chroma completely—which, in hindsight, was relatively poor decision making—he rushed forward, skidding on his knees to a halt next to the slumped body of the Enderian boy.

In his heart, he knew that Ranboo was dead.

But he was pulling the head up so that Ranboo's forehead was facing the ceiling, his crown pressed against Tommy's thighs—eyes staring into open space, slightly glazed over—brilliant green and scarlet red. Tommy ran his right hand down the black side of the Enderian's face and angrily wiped away the tears that were starting to drip down his face.

"Come on, Boo," he whispered, blinking rapidly. "Wake up."

Ranboo didn't wake up.

Ranboo wasn't asleep.

"Tommy," Techno said in a low voice.

"Wake up!" he said, louder, a note of frantic worry in his voice. "Wake up! WAKE UP!"

"He's not going to wake up, Tommy," Technoblade said gently, and Tommy raised his blurry vision to meet the gaze of Techno, whose eyebrows were tilted in a way to make him look sad and whose ears drooped in a sorrowful mourning.

Tommy shook his head. "No," he said. "He's just—unconscious. The bullet didn't kill him." He glanced over his shoulder. Chroma was gone. Perhaps he sensed the danger in the air, or maybe he didn't want to gloat until later. Whatever it was, Tommy didn't care.

"Look at his heart, Tommy," Techno said gently, and Tommy shook his head, lips compressed in a thin line. "Come on, Tommy. Look."

Tommy looked. Hated what he saw. Hated the tiny hole from which a trail of blood poured from. So small—less than an inch in diameter—and yet...

And yet.

Ranboo breathed no more.

Tommy inhaled sharply and didn't breathe it out, the sobs rising in his throat as he tried to keep the tears down. Ranboo was dead.

Ranboo was dead and Tommy still breathed and mourned and cried. Ranboo, who was supposed to outlive them all.

His fault.

Ranboo, the half-albino Enderian who'd smiled awkwardly and held out his hand for Tommy to shake on the first day of their meeting.

Ranboo, a survivor of the Red Planet's Genocide.

Ranboo, a member of the Children's Rebellion.

Blurily, he realized that three had become two, and half had become one-third. Blurily, he realized that a long-term friend was gone forever—no final words, no last goodbye. No message to the stars.

Ranboo, a medical officer aboard the *L'manburg*.

Someone would have to explain to Tubbo what had happened. Tommy wondered if it would be him—and wondered if he would survive telling the quick-to-anger Shulker what had happened. Some sick part of him hoped that he wouldn't. Some guilty part of him—the part that made him do Bad's stupid bright exercises during therapy—knew that he was slipping again—slipping to the person that he'd been after his parents had died, to the person that he'd been after Pogtopia and the Red Planet's Genocide—slipping to the person and the actions he'd taken after Snifferish died.

The sick part of him reveled in such a means to an end.

"*Breathe*, Tommy, you need to exhale—"

He exhaled. It wasn't pretty.

Nothing in life was pretty. He was quite literally holding the body of his dead friend as a half-Piglin strained to get closer, bound by dark metal chains. He had quite literally seen his parents give up their lives for the stars—the sick part of his mind whispered that they'd been working for Arachnids and lied to him, kept more information from him. Tommy ignored that; that was a problem for another day.

If he lived that long.

"He's gone, isn't he?" Tommy whispered, staring down at the face of Ranboo.

"Yeah," Techno said, sounding exhausted—Tommy realized that *he* sounded exhausted—that both of them had probably felt the fatigue of mortality, of a tired death-addled mind. "I'm sorry, kid. That bullet was meant to be for me."

And dimly, he realized that that bullet was supposed to have gone through Techno's forehead—that Ranboo, being taller than Techno, had taken it through the heart in a bad roll of the die—in a sacrifice that probably hadn't even meant to lead to death.

"It's not your fault," he said, and he was surprised that he meant it—though, to be fair, he had never been the sort of person to blame other victims who were never truly at fault. That didn't mean he didn't feel like an entire spaceship had rolled over him and left him in a pile of dust and dirt. That didn't mean anything.

"Don't do that," Techno said.

"Do what?" he asked stupidly, finally looking away from Ranboo's ashen face and up at the commander.

"Blame yourself."

"But it is—"

"*Not* your fault," Techno said. "It's not." He smiled, but it was a wan, sad thing. "It's never been your fault, Tommy. Pogtopia wasn't—Sniff wasn't—this isn't either."

"But if I'd just—" he started.

"Ranboo made his choice," Techno said, and Tommy was slightly annoyed that the half-Piglin wasn't quite letting him talk. "And, yeah, maybe things would have been different with different

choices. I might be dead. You could be dead. Others could be dead. All we have left to do is decide what to do with the time given to us."

Tommy bit his lip and cut himself back from saying, *what if you want less time?* Because that wasn't a good thing, and Bad had said he should stop saying negative things like that.

He was slipping, he knew. Down that same slope—that slope he'd fought so hard to climb. One small rockslide—it was more of an avalanche, really—and down to the bottom he went.

The sick part of him wondered if he would survive the climb this time.

"You should close his eyes," Techno noted softly.

"I'm getting to it," he snapped because he'd been thinking about it—but that was another goodbye—that was one of the final steps in accepting that Ranboo was well and truly gone. He'd done it with Sniff, and he'd done it with other children, but Ranboo...

...Ranboo he had known best of all—of those who had died in front of him, *in* his arms—Ranboo he had known best, and Ranboo whom he had loved so fiercely, even if he'd avoided the Enderian for a bit of the beginning, unwilling to want to bring back more memories that he'd been so sure that Ranboo didn't want.

He was crying again.

With shaking fingers, he reached up and flicked the eyelids of the Enderian shut.

It was not the end he'd wanted.

But it was Ranboo's end, nevertheless. Had it been happier—had it been years and years in the future, when Tubbo was older and greying, and Wilbur had long passed on, with Phil and Techno finally greying due to their superior life genes—Tommy might've been happier.

But Ranboo had been young. Too young—much too young to survive what he had and not endure what had happened. Ranboo had been seventeen, and while Enderians lived to about a hundred and twenty years—even in Human years, he hadn't even reached his majority. In Enderian years, the majority was twenty-five, even though it was Standardized to be twenty-one based on population and averages.

Ranboo was young. *Had been* young, Tommy reminded himself.

Because Ranboo was dead.

He wondered if somewhere else, in another place, another universe, Ranboo was being welcomed home. He wondered if Ranboo's memory problems had ceased to exist there—if he had rejoiced in the arms of his parents and had sat down on golden grass next to Alyssa and Grian and Foolish.

He hoped Ranboo was happy—wherever he was. Whether that be Beyond this plane of existence or floating amongst the stars.

He hoped Ranboo was happy. He was sad that Ranboo was gone.

But wherever the Enderian was, it was probably a better place than this galaxy.

It was when Tommy started to get far more tired than he thought was possible that he realized that something was wrong—and looking up at Technoblade, whose head hung heavy in an unconscious state, he realized that something was very amiss.

"Tec—Techno—blade," he slurred out, scared out of his mind—scared that he was *alone*, that Techno was dead as well—blinking rapidly to keep his eyelids from drooping as he stood up on shaking muscles. He promptly collapsed against the half-Piglin, who didn't move—even more terrifying—and Tommy wasn't satisfied until he heard the telltale heartbeat of someone alive under his chest.

He slipped into the dark.

When he next awoke, he was not in the same room that he'd been in before. Rather, he was in a room...opening into that room?

No, it was a glass divider, though the walls were the same and there were metal chains connected to the wall—the cuffs were lying on the ground, not on his wrists.

He could see Technoblade began to stir as well—whatever had knocked them out had taken the half-Piglin out for longer—and Tommy's eyes went right to the spot where he'd held Ranboo.

There was no body to be seen.

In his heart, he knew it wasn't healthy—Ranboo was dead; his body was empty—but in his mind, out loud, he let out a slight whine because he hadn't gotten anything to finality with Ranboo.

Already he missed the Enderian—and maybe he was clingy; clingier than Tubbo and Purpled—maybe he was, but he knew that he would open his eyes in the mornings—if he survived—and he would never see Ranboo's hovering smile over Tubbo's shoulder as the Shulker jumped on his bed to wake him up. He would never roll his eyes when Tubbo and Ranboo split their morning breakfast—never pretend that he didn't see Tubbo choke down the chorus fruit cereal with a gagging expression. He would never get another moment with Purpled and Ranbo in the fields of Pogtopia amongst grey stones of the dead.

Ranboo would never attend his graduation. Tommy would never get Ranboo a birthday present—he'd been planning one, even though Ranboo's birthday was months and months away and Lani's was the closest one so far—Tommy would never fake-punch Ranboo's shoulder in annoyance and call him boob boy to his face. He would never see the hidden amusement and the confused wrinkle of the boy's brow at the title.

"TOMMY!" Techno shouted, and Tommy fell back, surprised, his hand coming up to press against cold glass.

"I'm right here, Technoblade," he called out.

Techno didn't hear him, and a small part of Tommy died inside. "TOMMY!" the half-Piglin said, almost frantically, and Tommy pretended not to notice the way that the commander skipped over the spot on the floor in front of him.

"I'M RIGHT HERE!" he screamed. Screamed until his voice was hoarse. Wondered if someone had watched as he'd held Ranboo in his lap and sobbed.

"No," Technoblade whispered, after Tommy had fallen silent. "No, please—I can't lose them both
—"

"I'm right here," he said and leaned his forehead against the one-way glass. "Please."

"—*Tommy*—"

"I'm right here," he whispered, and it was hardly there and more thought than words, and he felt *broken* as if something had fractured. Something shattered and fixed had broken again. "I'm still alive, Techno."

The door on Techno's side of the room banged open, and Tommy jumped, wincing as he hit his head against the harsh glass. He sneered as he watched Chroma walk into the room—but his usual smirk was a shadow of its former self—a sad, broken thing that was more pathetic than bitter.

"Where is he?" Techno bit off hoarsely, sagging against the chains that held him to the wall—unable to move more than a foot in either direction. Tommy bit his lip as he watched blood roll down Techno's already red-encrusted forearms. If Niki was here, she'd freak.

Of course, Niki wasn't here. And Tommy was glad she wasn't.

"He's alive," Chroma said, obviously knowing who Techno was speaking of—or making an educated guess, anyway. "For now." His eyes darted to his right, slightly, and Tommy felt a thin

trail of sweat trickle down into the small of his back as Chroma glanced directly at the wall, though his gaze was a meter or so from Tommy's actual position.

Tommy wondered if Chroma took satisfaction in his fear. Techno snarled wordlessly under his breath, though perhaps it was only Tommy that saw the flash of panic in the half-Piglin's eyes—for something, *someone*, out of his control.

"Now," Chroma said, standing just far back enough that if Techno took a swing at him, the chains would stop him inches from the Avian's face. "Are you going to comply, or am I going to be forced to hurt the boy?"

"Don't do it," Tommy said instantly.

"Depends," Techno said dubiously.

"Fuck," Tommy muttered.

Chroma laughed, tilting his head. "Willing to do anything for your family, aren't you?" he sneered. "Stupid pig." Technoblade bristled slightly, but he was more intelligent than Tommy could ever be, and refused to rise to the jibe. "Why don't you tell me about the major warp highways? You are a navigator, after all...are you not?"

"No," Technoblade rumbled, eyes flashing dangerously—and perhaps if looks could kill, Chroma would have dropped dead. As it was, Tommy just silently cheered the half-Piglin on. "I'm a commander."

"Ah, of course," Chroma said, dusting a bit of his uniform on—as if being near Technoblade was dirty. If Tommy had had feathers, they would've ruffled in rage. "Surprising, with one of your birth."

"I think you should leave us alone," Techno said evenly—how he was keeping his cool was beyond Tommy. But maybe that's what had allowed Techno to survive to adulthood.

Chroma tutted. "No, I don't think I will. Tommy—"

He stiffened.

"—Tommy is beloved to me."

"Right," Technoblade drawled. "Like a pet."

"No, like my *son*."

"Philza is more of a father than you'll ever be," Techno said. Tommy felt a sad smile cross his face as he was compelled to watch this interaction occur.

"Philza is nothing but a chicken and a joke of a captain!" Chroma hissed, clearly enraged.

Techno grinned, tusks sharp and deadly—as if he'd finally found the Avian's Achilles' heel. "He's the best captain I've ever served under—I'll have you know that. He's smart and—"

"—old," Tommy murmured, lips twitching, and for a second, he could hear Wil's joyful laughter in his ears. Just for a second—and then the light faded and Ranboo's unseeing eyes filled his head. His smile dropped.

"—he's better than you'll ever be," Techno finished.

"Tommy is my flock," Chroma spat.

"You *abused* Tommy," Techno corrected, and Chroma drew back his hand and hit Techno on the cheek with the back of his hand. To his credit, the half-Piglin didn't flinch.

Brave, Tommy thought. *Very, very brave*. It might have helped that Chroma looked mildly surprised.

"Decent hit," Techno admitted. "Perhaps you've had practice on defenseless orphans, hmm?"

"He deserves it," Chroma said spitefully, and Tommy wilted. He did, didn't he? He deserved all this and more.

Shut up, Purpled spat in his ear—always the voice of reason in a tumultuous head.

"Tommy is one of the greatest kids I will ever meet," Techno said genuinely, and Tommy frowned. "He's brave and witty even in the face of so much horror—it's a damned wonder that he still smiles."

"Maybe I should chop off your head and make him watch," Chroma sneered.

"Please don't," Tommy whispered, banging a fist against the glass usefully. All it brought was pain. "*Please*."

Techno tilted his head. "And yet...if you do so, you lose all hold you have over him."

"He's easy to control," Chroma said dismissively.

"Yeah," Techno drawled. "I'm sure Pogtopia went to plan. You and your *child soldiers*." Chroma drew back a little, surprised. "Yeah, you think I didn't know? We're not stupid, *Chroma*. We do figure things out."

"They weren't good enough anyway—"

"—and yet you still want Tommy," Techno said, raising an eyebrow.

He was panicking; he knew that. Biting at his knuckles as he sat and shivered—not from the cold—and tried to keep the tears from falling and starting a never-ending waterfall. He raised his hands from his mouth and slammed them over his ears, squeezing his eyes shut.

It didn't do much to help.

"Thomas is an Avian," Chroma snapped. "He belongs with *me*."

"He belongs with people who care about him," Technoblade retorted, and Tommy let out a loud sob—sad and happy and scared all at the same time.

"You think that is you?" Chroma said.

"Yes," Technoblade said simply. "I care for him. I love him like I would a brother. He's annoyin', and sometimes I want to throw him out a window, but..." Techno sighed. "He's nice and *imperfect* and good. That's what makes him ten thousand times the man you'll ever be."

"I'm a Big Man," Tommy whispered, primarily to himself—and maybe he was trying to convince himself of that, or perhaps to the ghosts around him. "I'm a Big Man. I am, I *am*."

"He is nothing without me," Chroma hissed.

"He is everything without you," Techno retorted. "He is everything without you and so much more."

"*I* taught him to fly!" Chroma yelled—and he was losing it; he was trying to convince a person of logic and reasoning to not be logical.

"You taught him to die!" Techno yelled back, raising his voice—one of the rare times that Tommy had ever seen him do so. "You didn't even teach him to fly—*his parents did that*."

"The Arachnids murdered his parents," Chroma said. "I rescued him."

"He would have been far better off without you," Techno said, his voice dripping with ice. "You did nothin' but plant stupid ideas in his head and cause him trauma."

"You are not a good brother, *Technoblade*," Chroma sneered.

Techno raised his chin, and Tommy dumbly noted the purple-brown of a bruise forming on his cheek—right where the Avian had hit him. "Maybe in another life, I was a lesser bein'," he spat. "Another universe." Blood-red eyes glanced across the room, passing over Tommy's face—and he pressed a hand against the cool glass and wondered why Techno was bothering to fight for him when he didn't deserve it. "But not this one. I care for my family—and you know that, otherwise I wouldn't be here. You tried to kill me, and you nearly succeeded."

"If only that stupid *boy* hadn't been so self-sacrificial," Chroma noted with such disdain that Tommy flipped him off—even though they couldn't see him and he couldn't see them—and he reached out and couldn't even feel Chroma's beating heart because the same drug that had forbidden Ranboo to teleport was running through his veins. "It was always easy to manipulate him."

"Shut up, you *bastard*," Tommy snarled—and he had to be hurting something as he again smacked his palm against the glass as hard as he could. It stung like a fucking bitch, but it was nothing compared to the raging inferno in his being. "Ranboo is—" he choked on nothing and squeezed his eyes shut. "Ranboo was better than you'll ever be."

Nobody heard him.

He laughed, raw and high—he had to be the only person that had people around him and still be alone.

"Too bad," Techno was saying coldly. "He made his choice." Tommy noted the pain in his eyes and felt the same.

"It matters not," Chroma said dismissively—as if Ranboo was nothing more than a swaying dandelion in a garden full of weeds. Tommy choked back another sob as a patch of alliums came to mind, in a small wooded area—surrounded by golden grass and the tender breaking claws of an

Enderian as a smile crossed his face, the stem of such a simple flower breaking under his plying fingertips. "Tell me your secrets, *Commander*."

"Who are you, Ali Baba?" Techno snarled, raising his chin. Tommy cheered him on with shaking pumps of his fingers as he watched the two adults trade insults like Human children had Pokémon cards.

"What?" Chroma asked, genuinely confused. Techno merely raised an eyebrow. "You *will* tell me about your precious little Galactic Rebellion, Technoblade. Or someone's going to get hurt."

His eyes flashed over to the part of the wall that was only veiled on one side, and Tommy's blood ran cold.

He was going to die here, he realized belatedly.

I am going to die here.

Those Voices Are Making You Crazy, Mr. Blade

*"And then something invisible snapped
inside her, and which had come together
commenced to fall apart."*

- John Greene

"Don't do it," the self-righteous, stupid part of him said—cried out.

(The selfish part of him begged Techno to not let Chroma hurt him.)

He was not worth it.

(Don't let him hurt me.)

Hundreds of secrets—

(—NOT AGAIN —)

—hundreds of people could die because of the things a high-level officer of the Galactic Rebellion knew, could *possibly* know. Codes and locations of secret bases—fortunately, this wasn't the Arachnids; Chroma was a third party and—

—maybe the Arachnids were evil and Deo was lying—

Technoblade blinked once. Twice. Tilted his head. "What do you mean?" he asked calmly.

Chroma clashed his teeth. "I'll hurt him."

"Who is 'him'?" Techno said—and Tommy saw it, then, the scared look in his eyes as the half-Piglin went through every decision he could make and stalled for time.

Chroma rolled his eyes. "God, I thought you were dense, but I didn't think you were *that* dense."

"Hey, now," Technoblade, sounding genuinely offended, though Tommy knew better. "That's insultin' to a man's consciousness."

"That's the point," Chroma said, annoyed, and Tommy snickered slightly before remembering the awful situation they were in. "It's almost like you want Tommy to die."

Technoblade didn't respond, didn't twitch an eye—and Tommy's heart dropped before he vividly remembered Technoblade sitting him down and telling him that one should never give up their weaknesses to their enemies because of exploration.

Wait, no. Exploitation. Yeah.

Technoblade was *faking*.

At least, that was what Tommy was dreadfully trying to convince himself. Because Techno *cared*, he did.

Clearly, Techno's lack of reaction was not up to Chroma's standards, because Tommy watched as without so much as the Avian lifting a finger, Techno's head slammed against the harsh metal behind him, the half-Piglin letting out a pained grunt as his pupils dilated.

"Do you not *care*?" Chroma hissed, annoyed. "Tommy Innes will die without your intervention!" Tommy bit his lip until he tasted iron.

"I think you're bluffin'," Techno rumbled dangerously. "And I hope you're recordin' this so he might watch this and understand why I made my choice. He's cool like that."

"I do," Tommy whispered, pressing his cheek against the glass and letting the tears roll off his face. "I understand."

Because galactic secrets were more important than the safety of one boy—even if that one boy was Tommy Innes, son of Sam and Clara Innes, leader of the Children's Rebellion, and the youngest member of a dwindling Avian species. Because there was no guarantee to Tommy's safety, no way to know if Chroma was telling the truth or not. No way to know if he would keep his promise.

"I will hurt him," Chroma warned Techno. "Just as I will hurt you."

Techno hung his head slightly, and there was unwavering regret in his eyes. Tommy saw it. Tommy knew that he was *right*—that he wasn't worth decades of knowledge and secrets—that even though Techno cared for him, *loved* him—that if he were to give those secrets away, thousands of others could die because of it.

He was one kid in a galaxy primed for war.

And if he died, it would be to protect others. If Techno died from this, it would be to protect others. He accepted that. He was...mostly ready.

He was scared. He wasn't scared of dying—he was scared of pain. He was scared of Chroma. He was scared of being scared.

That didn't make much sense.

"You stubborn—" Chroma cut himself off as he gnashed his teeth. Techno and Tommy both watched him warily. "Fine. We'll get your secrets, one way or another. Guess we'll have to do this the hard way."

"People who take the easy route are losers!" Techno called out as Chroma stalked out, slamming the door behind him. Tommy watched sadly as the half-Piglin slumped against the chains, his ears drooping.

"I'm sorry, Tommy," Technoblade mumbled, his thick lashes dripping with—was that tears? Was he crying?

"It's okay, Techno," he murmured, even though Techno could not hear him. "I forgive you."

"How *sweet*."

Tommy jumped, fear flashing through him as he retreated against the back wall sharply, watching wide-eyed as Chroma walked into the room, a covered plate in one hand, his eyes shining with silent glee. "Chroma," he said dumbly.

Chroma tilted his head, acknowledging the name. "Tommy."

"Don't—" he cut himself off. "Don't say that."

"That is your name."

"Fuck off," he spat. "You know what I mean. Don't pretend you fucking care."

"Oh, but Tommy," Chroma said, his eyes falsely syrupy and conniving. "I *do* care."

"Fuck. Off," he repeated. "You—you killed Ranboo."

"He threw himself in front of the shot," Chroma said simply.

"You *pulled the trigger*," he snarled, tears running down his face and fists clenched tightly at his sides. "You were gonna—you were gonna kill Technoblade—"

"He's hardly a man and more of a monster; it doesn't count," the Avian scoffed.

"SHUT UP!" he screamed. "SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Chroma tilted his head again, looking more curious than angry—though that made little to no sense, as Tommy had essentially just disrespected him. "You're just jealous," he spat. "You're jealous he's sixty-nine times the person you'll ever be."

Chroma's eyes flashed with awful anger, and Tommy flinched slightly. "How dare you," the Avian seethed. "How dare you insinuate that that—that *thing* is better than me. I have toppled civilizations, Tommy—"

"Civilizations in the bronze age, maybe," he muttered.

"—I have destroyed ships, I have raised *armies*—"

"Of children," he pointed out. "Would I have joined their ranks?"

"You were listening to our conversation, then," Chroma said, jerking his head at the mirrored glass.

Tommy wrinkled his nose. "Who do you think told Technoblade that you were raising child armies?" he scoffed. "Don't fool yourself. You are nothing but a coward."

And then he couldn't draw in air. Tommy choked on nothing—it had been so long since he'd felt that, since his hands crept to his sarcophagus in some attempt to let the air flow down his throat—and maybe if he hadn't been all drugged up, he'd have a chance. Maybe if Rae and her shields were in reach, he had a *chance*—but he was sluggish and slow and he would *die* because of that—

Something cold settled around his wrists, and Tommy rolled to the side and gasped as he inhaled burning fresh air. Cool metal clinked on the metallic floor, and Tommy felt a chill trickle down his back as he stared at the manacles on his wrists, attached to a five-foot chain to the wall. Longer than Technoblade's, but still entrapping and impossible to get out of.

The dish that Chroma had been holding was next to where he lay on his stomach, chest heaving—a dish uncovered with a tip of a booted foot that was not his own—and Tommy recoiled as far from the wall as the chain allowed him to as a glistening golden apple popped into sight.

"Eat your food, Tommy," Chroma said, bored, as Tommy stared at the wretched thing, half on his feet and half-frozen. The Avian turned and stalked out, slamming the door behind him, leaving Tommy staring directly at one of the things he'd hoped to leave behind in a prison what seemed like a billion years ago.

He would not eat it.

Tommy reached out and touched it. His stomach growled, and his mouth watered. He remembered crunching into one the day before he'd escaped from the Wasteland with Tubbo. He remembered—well, he didn't, actually—how tantalizingly good it tasted.

Actually, he just remembered that it had been good. Not what it'd tasted like.

Tommy grabbed the apple and chucked it at the opposite wall. It crunched pitifully against the metal and rolled far out of reach, bruised and bleeding juices. He ignored the thing inside of him that screamed for him to taste it—*just one small bite, it wouldn't hurt*—because as much as he pretended not to listen to Niki's words, he knew they were true.

The addiction would come back twice fold, more disgusting and addicting than before. It was terrible for his stomach. It would hurt him.

It looked so good.

Tommy snarled at nothing and slammed his head against the metal. He stumbled backward, blinking as pain filled his head and dots scattered in front of his eyes. Sinking to his knees, Tommy turned away from the apple.

Technoblade was silent—he hadn't heard Tommy's cries, hadn't seen his tears. The half-Piglin's head was still hung as he stared at the ground, arms as limp as they could possibly go. They must

hurt, Tommy wondered, from not being able to move to a resting position.

He could no longer press his palm against the class, but if he leaned far enough forward, he could rest his forehead against its coolness.

"Forgive me," he murmured. "I am so sorry for being your downfall."

Technoblade's ear twitched, but that was simply a coincidence.

Valkyrae blinked awake into a world of pain.

The first thing she noticed is that Tommy's side of the bond was muted—he wasn't dead; that might've killed her because she'd been immersed in his side of the bond—but it was as if there was a thin but stretchy wall existed between them that wasn't constructed by them and she couldn't break.

The second thing she noticed was Sykkuno's overwhelming feeling of *joy-joy-joy* at her awakening. Not ten seconds later, the door to the medical wing opened, and a pink-hair Merling that Rae's slow mind identified as Nihachu after a moment's thought entered the room.

"I got the page that you were awake from a very eager Avian," the Merling said, though her smile was half-forced, and her eyes were red-rimmed.

"Tommy," Valkyrae said, and Nihachu winced slightly before straightening her back and composing herself.

"Yes, our bridge crew has deduced that Commander Technoblade, Junior Medical Officer Ranboo, and Ensign Thomas have been...kidnapped," Nihachu said, and Rae was pleasantly impressed by

the decorum that the woman had.

"No need to be so formal," she muttered, rubbing at her forehead. Nihachu walked over and poured her a glass of water from the bedside table. Rae glanced around and deduced that she was on the *L'manburg*, not the *Mira*. Which was odd, but she wasn't going to question it. She took the cup and downed it gratefully. "We're all on the same side here. Who took him?"

"Chroma," Nihachu said, wincing again, and Rae's heart dropped.

"Ah," she said.

"You know, then?" Nihachu said faintly.

Rae nodded. "He told me," she said. "On Icarus-45HB. I watched the rerun of the Pogtopian Media myself." She shook her head. "I read articles, too, afterward. I watched the videos because I'm cleared for it—I don't want to watch that. I didn't want to watch that. I did because Tommy is my Bonded."

"Thank you for telling us about his trouble," Nihachu murmured. "We would have found out far later. Maybe the few extra hours we got can help us find him."

Rae smiled for the first time that day. "I think I can help you with that," she murmured, glancing at the door as it opened, Sykkuno and Captain Philza entering it. Rae tilted her head respectfully, wincing slightly at the pain in her head. "Captain," she said.

"Lieutenant," Philza said. The question burned in his eyes.

"He's alive," Rae said, and Philza nearly slumped with relief, black feathers straightening from where they'd been ruffled in unease. "It's muted, though—something is blocking his side, and it isn't Tommy. But he's alive."

"How do you know?" Captain Philza asked curiously.

She tapped her head. "I can feel it," she said honestly. "I bet Syk told you—" the black-haired Avian nodded as he sat down on her bed, covering her hand with his. "—but the key point is something was hurting him bad enough that he could reach me from that distance, because he shouldn't have been able to."

Philza's blue eyes flashed, and suddenly Rae could feel the tension in the air. "Fuck's sake," the Elytrian cursed. "Did he say anything?"

"Avians cannot transmit words like you and Ambassador Kristin can," Rae said, picking at one of her nailbeds until Sykkuno nudged her. She scowled at him. "It is more...emotional." She sighed.

"I'm guessing that this is taboo to speak of outside your race?" Nihachu asked quietly.

"It would have been," Rae admitted. "Avian bonds are fragile things. There are so few of us left—four known, and however many Toast has been sworn to secrecy of—that it doesn't matter anymore. In a few decades, our species will be gone unless magically Avians decide to grow from the ground."

"It's, like, eight decades," Philza said with a frown. "Not a few."

Rae froze, glancing at Sykkuno, who looked confused. "He didn't tell them?" she asked.

"I don't think he knew," Sykkuno said. "Based on some of the things he said. His parent died when he was ten, remember? The telling age was twelve."

"What's going on?" Philza asked sharply.

Rae sighed. "I would prefer not to be the one to tell you this, sir," she said awkwardly. "But since Tommy does not know, it falls in my duty as the head of my flock to let his extended family know." She took a deep breath and let it out, a sad smile twisting at her lips. "Avians are powerful beings—perhaps that is why the Arachnids chose to destroy Avia so many centuries ago. We are akin to..." she trailed off. "RSG stars, or red giants, I suppose, compared to the rest of the species that stand—most are G2V-type stars, like Sol, with a normal lifespan." Understanding flashed in Nihachu's

eyes, quickly replaced by horrified competence. Philza still looked confused, his wings drawn close around him as he considered Rae's words. "I suppose in that metaphorical sort of way, Elytrians and Piglins are akin to M-type stars—or red dwarfs."

"So what you're saying is—"

"Yes," Rae interrupted. "Avians are powerful, just like RSG stars, but we burn off fast. That is why our age of adulthood is fourteen—and why Tommy is much more mature for his age than perhaps he should be. It is not just experience, after all."

"How long?" Philza asked, looking nauseous. "How long do you have?"

Rae shrugged. "At least eleven years," she said. "Sykkuno as well, even though I'm older. No more than twenty-nine."

"Holy shit," Nihachu whispered. "You guys live fifty years?"

"Forty to sixty, but yes," Rae said. "I'm twenty-nine."

"Wow, you don't look twenty-nine," the Chief Medical Officer said, blinking slightly. "I'm surprised I didn't know."

"It's not common knowledge, but it wasn't a secret either," Rae said with a slight shrug. "It's more been lost to time than hidden."

"I'm going to outlive Tommy," Philza whispered, rubbing his face and sitting down heavily on a cot, looking sad and terrified all at the same time.

"If both of you don't die early, yes," Sykkuno said. Rae elbowed him. "W-what? We were all thinking it."

"Only one of us said it," Nihachu pointed out.

Philza had his head in his hands. "You know," he said, sounding strangled. "For all the kids called me old, I never thought that I would outlive our youngest." He shook his head. "My mother is going to outlive Tommy, isn't she?"

"Probably," Rae admitted. "How old is she?"

"Eighty-seven," Philza said. "She's got a bit left to go. About fifty years." He winced. "Fuck, this sucks."

"That is how the universe works," Rae said apologetically. "Although I suppose the worst thing about telling you is we're going to have to tell Tommy to." She frowned. "How do we tell a young boy that he's technically in his adulthood—even if Galactic Law classifies him as a kid—and that he's over one-fourth of the way through his life?"

"That's why you let him go," Nihachu realized. "Because you assumed he knew he was old enough to make his own choices."

"Right," Rae said, twisting her lips. "Don't worry—even if the age of majority is fourteen, we still treat our young like children until they reach eighteen. Fourteen is just the technical age."

"Do you never grow old, then?" Philza asked. "Like Humans, Piglins and Felines do?"

"No," Rae said. "One day our life force ends—we can feel it coming, within a month or two, because everything is tiring as our bodies shut down—but our hair and fur, if we had any—will never turn grey like they do for Felines and Humans, and our teeth will never shed layers like they do with Piglins."

Nihachu winced. "Is it bad I find this interesting?" she asked.

"No," Rae said. "It's quite fascinating, actually. The comparison to red giants still stands—that's what my parents taught me, and their parents before theirs."

"It's hard to wrap my head around," Philza admitted. "He has—what...thirty-three years left, average?" Sykkuno nodded. "That's honestly terrifying. I've lived more years than that.""

"I didn't know that," Rae said, curious. "I thought you were in your eighties. You're quite young, then, for an Elytrian—much less a captain."

"Yes," Philza said. "As much as the kids make fun of me."

"I forgot to tell you," Rae said as Philza stood up, a few stray feathers falling onto the cot. The captain turned to look at her with unreadable eyes. "I can—I know where Tommy is."

"What?" Philza demanded. "And you didn't tell us?"

"We were busy talking about other things," she said defensively. "Besides, it's not like pinpoint accuracy. More like a compass. I can point out the general direction that he's in—once we get close I can't do much."

"So you could find a planet?" Nihachu asked eagerly.

"I could find a solar system," Rae corrected. "That's why it's not really helpful unless a flock is split up and one of them gets kidnapped by evil mass murderers." She closed her eyes and put her arm out, slightly upwards and to her left. "He's that way. Somewhere. Alive."

"I'll ask Ad—Captain Toast if I can borrow you and Sykkuno, if that's okay?" Philza said in a rushed manner, already bringing out his datapad. "I think the *Mira* is supposed to transport Minerva—" That name was spat with harsh disdain. "—back to Terra for questioning, along with the information that the *Benecia* has been breached."

"Of course," Rae said, bowing slightly as she stood up—with Sykkuno's help. "I would love to help you."

"Right," Philza said. "If you excuse me, Lieutenant, I'll be taking my leave now."

"Yes, Captain," Nihachu said, amusement coloring her voice. "I don't know much about Avian biology, Valkyrae, but I trust that if you are in too much pain from that headache of yours that you will come back?"

"Of course," she said, smiling. "We are not all as skirting as Tommy."

"I would hope not," Nihachu said with a smile, though it was fond as she bid them a farewell. Rae found she could walk straight, and her headache was more minor than it'd been ten minutes prior as she followed Philza's brisk walk through the halls, Sykkuno hovering anxiously at her shoulder. She didn't push him away, knowing that his worries were, while stifling, also useful in some cases.

A slight buzz of her datapad made her pull out the thin communicator, and she typed out a message to Toast and Corpse in the Amigops group chat.

Choke Me Like You Hate Me

↳ *rae and syk r u really leaving again*

Red Bitch With A Knife (Probably)

↳ *We're going to find Tommy, Corpse*

10000 IQ

↳ *I've accepted the transfer Rae*

Rest assured you might not like what you find

Sykuwu

↳ *Sorry Corpse :(*

Choke Me Like You Hate Me

↳ *its ok sykkuno im just sad 2 see u gone*

10000 IQ

↳ *What am I, chopped liver?*

Tommy cowered as far away from the mirrored window as he possibly could, hands over his ears, as tears poured down his face, trying to cut off the pained yells and groans of Techno as he was injected with some sort of liquid that was causing the half-Piglin immense amounts of pain. There were three guards there and a doctor— two guards to hold Technoblade against the wall when his eyes flashed redder and his fists tightened—and one to guard the door. The doctor person, a Human, had this sort of existential glee on his face every time he asked a question and Techno refused to answer.

Tommy almost would rather he be tortured than watch this. Because watching this was like watching the executions of his friends. Watching this and feeling the same helplessness that he'd tried to avoid—and yet still had felt over his life—was something he'd rather fucking avoid, thank you *very* much.

He didn't know how long he'd been gasping and trying not to slip into another bout of panic with his hands over his ears when one of the guards murmured to the doctor, "I don't think his heart can take another dose. The general—"

"Fuck what the general says," the doctor snapped, and Techno looked up with heavy eyes and Tommy cried out again, his throat sore from screaming and his wrists dripping with an awful amount of blood, just like the half-Piglin's were. They stung with pain in every movement, but he'd been ignoring them for minutes—hours?—and he could ignore them for far longer.

Maybe they would scar.

The doctor held up a needle, one that dripped clear fluid from the tip that looked like water and what certainly wasn't, and Tommy stared at it from his curled-up position in sheer horror and Techno's ears drew back and his lips pulled back behind his tusks in a near-snarl. "Tell me," the doctor drawled. "Who is the keeper of the intergalactic keys?"

"I don't even know what that means," Technoblade said, resigned and exhausted sounding. "Who uses keys anymore? Degenerates, maybe."

"I liked it better when you were screaming," the doctor decided, and Tommy watched as the needle slid into Techno's bloody wrist.

The commander's neck bulged as he swallowed down a silent scream, his veins popping slightly as he tensed in unmovable pain.

There was a slight pause. Tommy blinked—based on the pattern, he'd expected Techno to start screaming.

Fear clashed with fear and Tommy stood up on shaky legs, hands removed from his ears but near enough to his head that he could quickly clap his palms over his ears and hum to drown out the sound of a screaming friend.

Because he was standing, because he was *watching*, because he had been listening—he felt it before he saw it; knew what would happen before it did.

Technoblade's eyes rolled into the back of his head, a bit of white froth exiting his lips. He slumped against the chains, ignoring the pain that must've followed as scabs were torn away by metal cuffs.

"TECHNO!" Tommy screamed as the guards released the half-Piglin and the doctor rushed forward and pressed his fingers on the convulsing half-Piglin's throat, swearing under his breath. Tommy tugged at the chains with all his might, screaming again—maybe in pain, maybe in fear.

One of them would give first.

It was definitely not the metal. His skin tore, a bloody, wet sound that made him want to hurl.

His left hand suddenly felt loose and Tommy realized that one of his hands had slipped through the manacle as his thumb promptly dislocated and the skin across the back of his ripped so harshly that his vision went white and he stumbled, pressing his bad hand against the glass; fortunately palm-first. Tommy let out a sharp breath and zeroed in on the bloody handprint that he'd left on the mirrored glass, nearly throwing up as he took in what was left of his hand. Where perfect skin had once lain, there was now torn muscle and sinews—his abductor pollicis brevis had snapped, his mind helpfully supplied to him as he felt the soft claws of Ranboo reminding him of the muscles in his hand and what they did.

He could've sworn he saw the white of bone.

Tommy choked down a pained sob as he raised a hazy gaze to look out the mirrored glass. The doctor was now pumping rapidly on Techno's chest and barking orders at one of the guards—there were only two, now—whatever had happened to the third?

And he could do was watch, cradling his hand, as Techno's chest refused to rise and fall and refused to rise and fall and—

Technoblade Never Dies, Except When He Is Technically Pronounced Dead. But He Comes Back. For Now. Maybe.

*Mors Immatura, that's the word for this all,
How I've watched all my friends die for me,
Sitting lonely under starlight, whispering,
Quietly and softly so not even the sky hears,
Per aspera ad astra, per astra ad mortem.*

- An excerpt from "The Universe Isn't Fair (But Please, I Really Need A Break)" by Katzen on Twitter, who sent me this lovely poem that they made about TCR

Technoblade lived.

And Tommy breathed out heavily and leaned back, nearly blacking out as one of his fingers absently tried to curl inwards and failed, a trail of stinging pain running up his arm until it cut into his brain.

The doctor and guards left, and Techno breathed once more, though Tommy did not see him do more than stare into space and blink a few times, shaking his head and muttering words that Tommy couldn't quite hear.

Blood pooled under his hand. Tommy stared at the golden apple in his good hand—his *right* hand, fortunately—he'd managed to grab it because it had been in reach now. He swore loudly, rubbing a bit of dirt from the shine off onto his equally dirty uniform.

He knew that it was bad for him. That Niki would *kill* him. That he would probably have to get a billion hyposprays and have to go through therapy again.

He also knew that he would die without it. Chroma probably hadn't intended for this to happen—Tommy had, for the first time, brought this upon himself—and he knew that golden apples increased the number of red blood cells in his body along with giving him an addiction that rivaled that of the drug made from *Erythroxylum coca* and *Erythroxylum novogranatense*.

He would die of blood loss; he knew that. It was no small wound—he had torn through two layers of skin—*dermis*, not-Ranboo whispered in his ear—and it took up half of the back of his left hand, stopping at his wrist and stretching from the lower phalange of the thumb across the skin and up the to the first knuckle of his center finger. His pointer finger was mangled and at its deepest point—the cuff had torn into that the most, and Tommy liked to pretend he couldn't see the white glint of bone that made him nauseous.

Eat it and probably die.

Not eat it, and definitely die.

Tommy drew in a long breath, glancing up through tear-filled lashes through the mirrored window. Technoblade still sat, not having moved a muscle save for his jaw as he twitched his head and his ears and muttered things under his breath.

Once or twice, Tommy had seen him clench his fists. Nothing more than that. It worried him—but everything worried him. Everything scared him.

Ranboo was dead, Tommy was dying, and Technoblade was acting nothing more than like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

He wanted nothing more than to reach out to Rae—but their bond was muted, and he was scrambling for purchase at the end of a line above an endless cliff.

He wanted to hug Wilbur again and listen to his music and soft-spoken voice with so much emotion. He wanted to gaslight Kristin into letting him into their shared quarters to play with Phil's feathers absently once they'd shed and then pretend that he didn't have them. He wanted to run around the ship with Mellohi and Purpled at his heels and cause mass chaos. He wanted to get into play-fights with Drista, the child assassin—no matter how much she hated that title—it made sense why she won all the time. He wanted to squint and call Ranboo and Lani nerds when they were quizzing each other on the newest vaccine or cold outbreak. He wanted to fall asleep listening to

Tubbo rant excitedly about the newest episode in the Office's season seven-hundred-something and wake up with drool on his shoulder because the smaller boy had fallen asleep as well.

He wouldn't get any of those things. Life had changed the moment that Ranboo had made his decision. Things would always be different, now—even more subdued if Technoblade died.

Tommy didn't know how much death he could take.

He bit into the apple.

It was everything he'd ever imagined, and that honestly scared him.

If home was a taste, this would be it.

That is, home that tasted like nobody had been it for a few days. If that made sense. With spiders. And dust.

He was drooling. He'd also eaten the entire thing, core and all. Tommy frowned at his juice-covered hand. He'd only meant to eat one bite...that's all that was needed for the blood cells to kick it up a notch.

He was also still hungry. Fuck carrots and kale—he wanted more golden apples.

Actually, that probably wasn't healthy—

He was losing it. Tommy gritted his teeth and slammed the back of his head against the wall, losing his hopes and dreams for barrels of golden apples as a whining pain flashed through his body, echoing down into his hand—which had started bleeding heavily again. Well, at least that meant he wasn't going to die of blood loss, because the coagulating process had thankfully restarted.

He might, still. There was way too much blood on his hand and down his leg and on the fucking floor for it to be particularly healthy. Tommy stared at the redness for a moment before shaking his

head, realizing he'd been dissociating for a good ten minutes, based on how much the blood pool had grown.

Had he really just measured time based on the amount of blood he'd lost?

Oh, God, he was losing it. Maybe he would see Ranboo in the afterlife. Ranboo would laugh at him. Grian would *definitely* laugh at him.

Sam would hug him.

Puffy would cup his cheek and tell him that he'd done good.

He'd meet his mother again.

His cheeks were wet. Tommy reached up to wipe them away and nearly screamed as his tendons pulled as he wrenched his hand back to resting position at his side. There was blood on his cheek.

He had to step back towards the wall to smear it further with his good hand, his right hand, which was still cuffed to the wall. His cheeks were still wet, and he glanced at Technoblade, who was essentially motionless, slumped against the wall. Tommy sat down heavily, wondering why Chroma hadn't come to check on him—if, at least, to gloat. He fucking hated the Avian's guts, but he knew that Chroma would at least save him from dying, if at least to boast further.

Or...maybe Chroma would never come in, and Tommy would die here, standing—no, he was leaning now—leaning—no, he was sitting down, now; when had that happened?—sitting against a wall with blood on his face and uniform pants and cheek. Maybe Chroma would open the door to gloat further and he would find the cold body of a boy whose luck had run out, who should have died long ago and miraculously survived out of sheer stubbornness and quite a bit of dumb luck.

Maybe Chroma would come in and Tommy's ghost would feel—if ghosts could feel anything; if ghosts existed—some amount of derision for him. Maybe he would laugh and tell Chroma that he was dead and dead people couldn't be manipulated, couldn't be tortured.

Maybe he wanted to be dead.

The tiny voice in his head—the rational, smart part of him—knew he was spiraling. That this was a *bad* mindset to enter. That part of him had Rae in his head, her sleeping mind whispering reassurances that she wasn't even aware of—like calling across a canyon that he had somehow jumped across once to catch her hand.

The second voice in his head, the irregular irrational part that had told him to jump off that bridge and to do things that most people wouldn't even be brave enough to do—like enter the Arachnid warship with Purpled and Tubbo—was telling him to let it happen. To *lie* there and let it happen and relish the rage that would come unto his death.

And he would see his family again. He would see Sam and Puffy and Clara. He would laugh with Grian and Alyssa and Foolish and tell them how brave they were; how much he missed their stupid jokes and dances and songs.

He would talk to Sniff again as she meandered on about machinery and engineering—maybe she'd be fixing an engine, grease on her face and her hair tied back with bright eyes as he appeared in front of her. Maybe she'd have wings—she had been an Elytrian, after all.

He wondered what color they'd be. Maybe a light pink—perhaps a sky blue. A mint green. He'd never gotten the chance to ask her before she'd died—perhaps it was silly of him to have thought they'd have all the time in the world.

Best of all, he would see Ranboo again. Ranboo, one of the oldest friends he had. Ranboo, who had jumped in front of a bullet to save his friend. Ranboo, whose eyes he had watched die, and whose time he had spent too little with. Ranboo, Tubbo's beloved—Ranboo, the Enderian with too big a heart and too few words coming out of his mouth. Ranboo, with his two-toned hair and his monochromatic eyes and his claws that were more delicate to touch than most people's fingers.

And as the years passed, he would see the others too—he didn't know who would be first, but Phil would definitely be last. They'd join him, one by one, and then he could hug Purpled again.

Maybe he did want to die. And maybe he'd accepted that.

The door flew open, and Tommy looked up with blurring vision to see a green man standing there.

Yeah, he was definitely hallucinating—what the fuck?

"You're Tommy?" the thing asked in a high-pitched voice—and why did he have glasses? Wait, he wasn't green anymore—he looked Human; mop of brown hair and four limbs and brilliant green eyes that were like Dream's, but...more.

"Uh," he managed, blinking rapidly, and wondering if he'd imagined the gelatinous body the thing—the man—had had only seconds prior.

"I'm here to rescue you," the man said.

"I'm hallucinating," Tommy decided faintly.

The man blinked at him as he drew closer. "We gotta go," he said, producing a key from the pocket of his blue jeans—seriously, what the fuck—and unlocking Tommy's other cuff.

"Are—are you 'n an'g'l?" he said in a slurred voice. "Come to take me home?"

"We'll deal with your underlying issues later," the man said with a grimace as he pulled Tommy to his feet, allowing the younger boy to lean on the right side of his body.

He was definitely dreaming. Either that, or he was dead and this weirdo guy was his guardian angel come to take him to the afterlife. Which was fine with him, honestly.

"Wha's your n'me?" he asked, blinking rapidly to dispel the black dots over his eyes.

"Oh," the man said. "Charlie. Charlie Slimcicle."

"'s a st'pid n'me," he muttered. "T'mmy Inn's is a l't better."

"I'm sure it is," Charlie said with a sad smile on his face. "My name was a gift from the Universe."

Tommy squinted at him as they closed his cell door behind him. The blood in his hand had coagulated and formed a sort of soft scab—which was good, because Purpled would—Purpled would kill him if...

He lost that train of thought and watched as Charlie unlocked a mirror door ten yards away from his own. Inside, before Charlie blocked the doorway, he saw a shock of pink. What was pink doing in the afterlife? Wait, no, pink was a color.

Something was wrong.

"Hey, woah," Charlie was saying, and Tommy blinked as he lost time and Charlie had his hands up, green eyes wide as Technoblade *growled* at him—like a fucking wolf, no less, his pupils blown black and obscuring his red eyes. "I'm just trying to rescue you, dude—"

"Technoblade," Tommy muttered, limping into the room, and the half-Piglin whirled on him, eyes glinting dangerously—and maybe if Tommy was in the right state of mind he would have backed off, but Tommy kept walking, kept going right at death itself until he could count the threads on Technoblade's blood-and-sweat-stained shirt. "Did you die too?"

There was a pause. The half-Piglin, whom Tommy thought wasn't quite all there, regarded him for a second, tusks bared dangerously.

Tommy smiled sleepily and leaned his head against the commander's shirt, bringing up his good hand to cup the back of Technoblade's back. "My—my brother." He closed his eyes.

An almost hesitant hand came around and hugged him back, and Tommy sighed into the half-Piglin's grip. "The voices," Techno said softly, so quiet that Charlie, who was unlocking Techno's other cuff, couldn't hear. "The voices are too damn loud."

"I dunno what you're talking about," Tommy said, drawing back. "The afterlife shouldn't have any voices. Hey, do you think Ranboo is here?"

"I don't think we're dead, kid," Techno said softly, and then winced, bringing up the hand that had been previously around Tommy to his forehead. "*Stop*. I don't want to spill his blood."

"My blood is already spilled," Tommy said seriously, gesturing at his lousy hand with a small wince. Techno glanced towards it with a slight frown—and Tommy watched as his eyes turned near-black before he growled and pinched himself. "And what do you mean, we're not dead? Of course we are—what else would this be?"

"A rescue," Charlie said from his side.

"Ay, my guardian angel!" Tommy said excitedly.

"You're not dead, dude," Charlie told him, a touch worriedly. "The Universe would *kill* me if I didn't do my job properly."

"You're not Human, are you?" Techno asked Charlie.

"Of course not," Tommy scoffed. "He's an angel!"

"I'm not an angel," Charlie said with a sigh. "But you're right, Commander. I'm not Human either." He tilted his head. "Come on, let's go. Before they realize it's a diversion."

"Ooh, demons," Tommy said happily.

"Okay, he's gonna be a problem," Charlie said, eyeing Techno. "Can you—are you okay?"

"I've got these fuckin' voices in my head telling me to kill everything livin' in sight, so not really," Technoblade grumbled. "That drug awakened...something. Someones. In my head."

"That's...not good," Charlie said.

"No," Techno said. "But—*FUCK!*" He pushed Tommy away and slammed his fist into the wall. Tommy heard three bones break as he stumbled back, Charlie reaching out and grabbing his shoulder to keep him from tipping over. Technoblade didn't seem to comprehend the fact that he'd quite literally broken bones as he gritted his teeth, a small trail of blood slipping from his nose. "Get out of my head. *Get out of my head.*"

"It's okay, Technoblade," Tommy giggled, and wow, he really felt light and buttery—was buttery a verb? "We're dead; you can do whatever you want now!" He spread his arms wide and winced when his left hand screamed in pain. "Ouch."

Techno breathed out sharply through his nose, and when he blinked his eyes, they were their standard, glittering red. "What is wrong with him?" he asked, as Charlie nervously proffered a phaser and the commander took it with his right hand, unhooking the safety with a deft flick of his forefinger.

"I dunno," Charlie said, blinking his green eyes. "You're not going to murder us with that phaser, right? Because I gave that to you in good faith."

"No," Techno snapped.

There was some awkward silence. Tommy felt another laugh bubble up in his throat again. Techno gave him an odd look.

"Was he..." Techno asked, trailing off. "Uh. Tortured?"

Charlie shrugged. "I mean, maybe. He's definitely crazy. And not like on pain medication or anything—he's just crazy." Charlie hesitated. "I mean...you're not exactly all that sane either."

"Yes, but at least I have accurate inhibitions," the commander said dryly. Charlie inclined his head.

Tommy frowned, tugging on Technoblade's hair. The half-Piglin winced. "I am not crazy, *Technoblade*," he pouted. "The slime is being rude!"

Technoblade stiffened. "Slime?"

"Yeah, he was all green 'n shit when he came in my room," Tommy said, nodding. Charlie looked vaguely ill. "Like slime. Green jello. I want jello. Can I have some jello?"

"You can have jello when we get to the *L'manburg*," Techno said softly, a nervous smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Slime, huh?"

"I guess," Charlie said. "But we really have to go."

"Okay," Techno said. "If I shoot you, I'm sorry."

"You know, Commander, that really does not make me feel any better," Charlie said, smiling widely—but nervously. "They will meet us outside."

"They, huh?" Techno muttered, primarily to himself. "Okay, Theseus, think you can walk?"

Tommy nodded vicariously. "Of course I can walk, Technoblade," he scolded. "The day I can't walk is the day that lightning strikes me from the sky!" Charlie's eye twitched.

"Good," Technoblade grunted. "I'd give you a phaser, but I don't think that's wise."

"Goop schloop and all that," Charlie said, and Tommy frowned, confused. "Plus I don't have another phaser." He gestured to the one in Techno's hands. "Giving you one was already a mistake."

"Fair enough," Techno said. "Let's hope we don't run into any trouble." He raised his phaser until it pointed at the ceiling, finger on the trigger. Probably some sort of resting position. "You ready to follow, Theseus? We might have to run."

"This is silly," Tommy announced. "I shouldn't have to run in the afterlife!" Techno and Charlie both sighed in unison. "No, really! You guys are being dumb! A slime and a pig, haha!"

"We'll deal with that headcanon later," Charlie repeated. "Come on, let's go."

It was a bit of a blur, running through white halls. Tommy kept his eyes on pink and green and sometimes a hand would take his and he would have to run more and more—his hand hurt. Not his feet, though. Sometimes loud noises would go off and then Tommy would have to step over obstructions on the path—ooh, red pools! Maybe that was cranberry juice!

But Technoblade wanted him to keep running, and Technoblade was wise 'cause he was the son of the wisest man ever, obviously Philza Minecraft—so Tommy listened to him.

Tommy listened to him until everything was bright and green grass touched his boots and stained his red uniform—red and green red and green red and green—Tommy listened to him until he saw grey clouds and a rolling beach and endless blue and cerulean seas.

Then he stood in the grass outside a side door of a lab that one day he would find out had been the place of the deaths of hundreds of Avians and he felt the wind in his blonde hair and he drew in a deep breath and he smelled the salt of an ocean so different from the one in San Francisco.

"I'm not dead, am I?" he asked himself.

"No," Technoblade answered—and was that a spot of blood on his cheek, beneath dilated eyes that flickered ever so slightly? "No, you are not."

Tommy sighed heavily. "Dang," he said. "Wish I was." Technoblade tilted his head, a dangerous but appraising look entering his eyes. Tommy ignored him, climbing up onto a four-foot sand dune, staring at the rolling ocean and the pale grey clouds that blanketed the region.

Thunder rumbled.

"Ah," Charlie said, sounding nervous. "They're nearly here."

"What is happening?" Technoblade demanded, deep in the background of white noise. "What are you talking about?"

"TOMMY INNES!"

He turned, slowly, and found that he wasn't afraid—maybe he should have been. Maybe he should have been, as he turned, one hand numb and unfeeling, the other limp at his side, to face Chroma, who stood thirty yards away with fourteen soldiers at his side, all of them carrying phasers.

He was unblinking.

"Chroma," he said. Techno had his gun pointed at the man, but hadn't yet pulled the trigger—he was afraid, because he knew that once the Avian died that all three of them would die as well.

"*You*," Chroma sneered at Charlie, who was wide-eyed and scared—not a fighter, but maybe he didn't have to be. "*Sl'yǎmǎ*."

"When I was young," Charlie started, in a voice that was slightly shakey but brave all the same. "When I was young, and Avians freely roamed the universe, they were better than you'd ever be. They didn't kidnap children. They didn't torture members of a flagship. They were good people." Chroma's fist tightened on his phaser, but he made no move to fire. Behind them, on the sand dune, Tommy felt the hair on the back of his neck rise.

"That's bullshit," Chroma snorted. "*Sl'yǎmǎ* do not live longer than twenty years." What the fuck was a *Sl'yǎmǎ*? Was it some kind of code?

"You are correct," Charlie said, resignation in his voice. "But we live again, and again, and again, as long as our conditions are right. And I live again, as do my brothers and sisters as we rise from the ashes to fight people like *you*. We are few and far between, but we are enough to rid the universe of scum like *you*."

Chroma hissed. "You lie," he snarled. "The Sl'ymǎ have crept back to their pools of ooze to rest forevermore in the cracks of the universe."

"Perhaps once," Charlie said, and a grin popped on his face. "Dap me up."

Tommy watched in horror as Chroma's finger tightened on the trigger and a single line shot through the air, directly at the—at Charlie. A Sl'ymǎ, or whatever.

Charlie didn't move.

Charlie turned green, and the bullet ripped right through his body like a stone through water and plopped out the other side. There was silence as Chroma lowered his gun and stared. Technoblade had an eyebrow raised in surprise, though he was one millisecond from shooting the Avian in the head.

And then Charlie was—was Human-passing again, and grinning fearlessly, and there wasn't an ounce of blood or ooze or paleness and he was fucking *fine*.

"Holy shit," Tommy whispered. Thunder rumbled in the sky, and Charlie glanced at the sky.

"They are coming," Charlie whispered into the electrified air. "Do you still want to be here when they arrive?"

"They are *myths*," Chroma said, but for the first time since Tommy had met him, there was a hint of fear in his voice. And Chroma didn't fear anything. "You are a liar."

"By all means," Charlie said. "Stick around to find out."

Chroma left.

Tommy stared.

"What the fuck," he said.

"I agree with that statement," Techno said. "Heh?"

"What—" he started, and then cut himself off.

Charlie's eyes grew very, very wide. "Get off the sand, Tommy," he said. "*Get off*—"

Blinding white. Heat. Pain.

Nothing.

"*Stop*," Valkyrae said, and Dream pulled the ship out of warp at her command. She flung out a hand and pointed directly to the left and a bit downwards. "There—is there a solar system near here?"

"Te—" Philza started, before he cut himself off. The bridge was dead silent. Philza exhaled slightly, his feathers ruffling. "Sorry. Purpled." The boy looked up from his temporary position at the navigation desk. "Anything?"

"A sector over, yes," Purpled said. "Solar system seven-six-delta. Four planets, one in the Goldilocks zone." He paused, and Rae saw grief flash in his eyes. "Captain."

"Gotcha," Dream said, turning the ship and pushing them in that direction. "Ten minutes to arrival."

Rae opened her mouth to respond, but a race of shock and horror flashed through her from the muted bond, and she cried out, reaching over and grabbing the empty navigation desk to steady herself.

He's gone! Tommy shrieked in her mind, and she was sure he was accidentally projecting because then it was muted and he was gone and she felt empty. The echoes of his cries lingered in her mind; a terrifying sound that she never wanted to hear again. They reminded her of the cries that she'd heard that horrible time aboard the *Mira* before she and Sykkuno had been discharged from the ship. Rae squeezed her eyes shut for a few seconds, cutting out all the worried shouts that had occurred when she had cried out from mental distress.

"Dead," she gasped out, and it was more Tommy's words than hers. "*He's dead.*"

Damn, you can shoot lightning out of your ass?

*"It hurts to leave a light on
for nobody."*

- Graham Foust

"Rae."

And it was Purpled, not Phil or Wilbur or Tubbo, that shook her shoulders and caused her to look into his abnormal magenta eyes. "What do you mean, he's dead?"

Rae shook her head wordlessly.

"Valkyrae—is Tommy dead?"

That was it, wasn't it? The key question.

"No," she breathed out, and Purpled sat down on the desk, relief shining in his eyes. Around her, four more exhalations sounded out. Her hands were shaking. "But—he was thinking about—someone. Being dead."

"Let's fucking hope it was the other members of the Children's Rebellion, his parents, or Snifferish," Purpled said grimly as he returned to his station. "Or else something's about to go really wrong."

There was a tenseness in the air that couldn't be described.

Rae didn't even have to look into Philza's worried eyes as she swallowed down her thoughts and prayed she was dead wrong.

"Coming out of warp," Dream announced—and had it really been that long?

"There," Rae breathed out, her head tilted to the side as she regarded two of the planets within the viewport. Philza was on his feet, pacing by his chair, and he paused at her words. Rae gestured to the second planet—the one in the Goldilocks zone, with mostly blue oceans and expansive beaches bordering the sparse continents. A wave of clouds was centered around one particular continent and half the water—a massive abnormal storm that made Rae nervous and apprehensive at the same time. "That one. Right there."

Philza paced over to where Wilbur was sitting. "Comm Sapnap. Get a response team ready."

"I'm going with you," Rae said, standing up. "I'll—! If he's—" she cut herself off. "I can help them. I know how to fight." As an Avian, she did not want to say.

Philza nodded sharply, not willing to argue with her. "Niki, Sapnap, Hannah," he listed out.

"I'm coming too," Purpled and Tubbo said at the same time.

Philza shook his head. "No fucking way. I already have enough children down on that planet."

"Ranboo's my husband!"

"Tommy's my best friend!"

Two boys. Six words. Desperation lacing their tongues.

"And neither of you have the correct combat training to combatant possible people with phasers," Phil said sharply. "I expressly forbid it. That is a direct order from your Captain, *do you understand?*" Neither of the boys answered. "I am dead serious when I say that if you disobey that

order, I will not hesitate to put your ass right back on Terra and have you, Purpled, complete another major at school, and you, Tubbo, program Operations from the ground. For the next six years."

"Yes, sir," both boys chorused glumly. Rae was secretly glad that they'd done that.

"If I may," Dream said. "I have combat training."

"Yes," Philza said, tilting his head. "Your sister—"

"Drista will want to come as well," Dream said. "Tommy is her friend."

"What?" Tubbo cried out. "But that's not fair!"

"Drista was trained as a spy for multiple years," Philza interrupted, and hell, Rae hadn't known that; because Drista was far too *young* to have been a soldier. "She can put together a gun in nine-point-three seconds and can use a sword better than anyone on this ship save Dream and Techno."

"She told us," Purpled said. "In the transport to Kinoko."

"I would have thought so," Philza said. "My point is, Drista is trained for combat. You, Tubbo, and you, Purpled, are not. No matter how many traumatizing things you have gone through—you *are not trained for direct combat*. Chroma may have taught you to fire a gun, but that was standing at a range. Perhaps he might have taught you to be an actual soldier, but the Fall happened before that." Purpled winced.

Wilbur had apparently finished his transmission by the time Philza's monologue was done, because he turned around in his chair. "Bay five, Phil."

Dream and Rae started towards the lift in unison.

"Rae?"

She turned, facing Purpled, who was standing there, hands clenched at his sides, eyes flashing furiously.

"Bring them home."

She did not incline her head nor respond. There were promises she couldn't keep—and in her heart, she knew that this was not one of them.

By the flash in Purpled's eyes, maybe he suspected as well.

Technoblade felt the scorching heat fill his vision as lightning struck the ground behind his little brother's scrambling feet. The voices in his head rose to a dull roar as his eyes burned from the sudden input of light into his retinas. As he blinked away the brightness, he scrambled forward towards Tommy's half-scorched body—the bolt had entered through the boy's back and had exited through the one foot that had been planted on the ground.

"Tommy," he whispered, rolling him onto his stomach and nearly puking at the feel of burned skin under his palms. He cupped the boy's face, hand scrambling for the throat, the pulse—

"Tommy—"

Kill him!

Squeeze his throat!

Spill his blood!

Blood for the Blood God!

"Shut up," he snarled into the air, silencing the awakened voices of his ancestors. People that could hear the voices of Piglins long gone were considered prophets; oracles—but now Techno understood why they never lived longer than a few months after their awakening—because if he were alone without a family, he'd probably consider suicide as well. The voices weren't helpful; all they did was scream for blood. It was annoying. Like, they could at least be useful.

His fingers dug into Tommy's neck.

Kill!

Snap his neck!

He ignored them.

There. A pulse. Slow, but there. Techno sat back on his heels and let out a breath of relief—which quickly turned into scrambling for his fallen phaser as he rolled to the side as two more lightning bolts struck the ground ten feet away in rapid succession. Thunder boomed—he hadn't even known lightning could strike twice like that.

When the blinding light cleared—God, his head hurt more than usual, what with the voices that wouldn't *shut up* and the constant glare of white radiance—two figures were standing there, both with glittering purple and blue hair that reminded him of pictured nebulae, though one had a white shirt with a sunset and a jean jacket covering his very existential-looking clothes, and the other had bright red boots and a striped scarlet-and-white belt.

"Shit," the one on the left hissed—the one with the jean jacket, as he paced towards Tommy and Techno.

"Don't take another step," he snarled out, raising his phaser. The man—the *thing*—paused in his steps.

"It's okay," Charlie said reassuringly as if Techno was so trusting of the—the Sl'ymǎ, a species so old that it had been lost to history like many other ancient races. A species that could, apparently, live again. "They're good."

Techno didn't trust him. Trust took years to build, seconds to break, and forever to repair. Whatever Eret said in his mandatory therapy sessions once every three months, Technoblade absolutely did not have trust issues. He simply knew better.

"That's a bit of an understatement, Charlie," the thing said, finally, in an accent that was a bit too much like Minx's for Techno to feel comfortable. "We are neither good nor evil. We simply are."

"Thank you," Charlie said. "You're really making my job easier."

"What are you?" Techno demanded, after glancing down at Tommy's prone body to make sure the boy was still breathing. Not *who are you*. They weren't anything like Techno had ever seen.

The other man walked up beside the first. Techno looked at his purple eyes—eyes that were similar in color to Purpled's, yet so *different*—if there was one word for it, it would be old. But old wasn't a way to describe *eyes*, so that made no sense.

"We are Starborne," it said simply. "In Standard."

"Children's tales," he snapped, thinking of bedtime stories of beings that could wield energy and light itself—as if these two things hadn't just appeared from behind—within?—lightning strikes. Denial, Tommy would have called it.

"We have existed throughout time and space itself, and for thousands of years, we have spread small inklings and stories among the people of this galaxy," the first one said. Techno was shaking his head. No, *no*, they were lying.

"Why?" he croaked out. "Why intercede now?"

"Because all the races lie in the balance of people like him," the second one said, kneeling by Tommy's side. "People who care for others, even if they should not."

Techno didn't particularly have the strength to stop him as he grimaced at the influx of voices in his head, all screaming for the blood and death of the people around him. "Who are you?" he asked.

The first one looked at him, tilting his head ever so slightly. "We are Starborne," he said again, and if Techno weren't feeling as if a thousand pins were forcing their way into his body, he'd throw his hands up in disgust. "And names have power, Technoblade. We do not give out names so freely, nor would you be able to pronounce it." The second one cleared his throat. "But we have chosen names from your language that could be deemed acceptable, same as Charlie has."

"My name *is* Charlie," the Sl'yǎmǎ said unhappily.

The first Starborne laughed. "It is in this life, *gh'yashlyn*," he said, and Techno drew back from that word directed at Charlie that held so much and so little. The Starborne seemed to notice his discomfort. "Words—words now—hold but a shade of the power they used to have."

"What does that even mean?" Technoblade asked, cautious but curious, even as a grounding hand lay on Tommy's shoulder, where the second Starborne was checking the extensive burn marks down the boy's back.

"Before," the first Starborne started. "Before the Fall—no, not *that* Fall—before the Big Bang; the start of this era of the universe, one could say—"

"There were others," Technoblade breathed out.

"Of course," the first Starborne said. "Many others. It was a universe so close to the center of—" he stumbled over his statements with a small pause and a flash of annoyance. "—*magic*, for lack of better words. With words, you can say something. You can ask a question, pose a rhyme. Words, *then*, were as they are now, but instead of an askance, they held power. And with that power came the want to do evil." He shook his head. "It doesn't matter anymore. Your friends are close, and we must be gone before then."

"Where will you go?" he asked.

"We'll be around," the first Starborne said. "Even if you cannot see us. We are not always there—we are rarely *here*—because there is an entire universe around us and billions of people that should be saved for the future."

"You know the future?"

"A version of it," the second Starborne said, speaking for the first time in many minutes. "The Universe commands us, and we follow them through many paths and galaxies."

"You look Human."

"Or maybe Humans look like us," the first Starborne said gently. "Maybe all the species have some closeness to us."

"But they evolved from the Tiktaalik," Technoblade said. "They weren't placed on Earth by any God."

"No," the first Starborne said. "But influencing isn't very difficult when the evolving stage happened. Perhaps something put a bit of life on—*Earth*, as you named it—and knew that by doing that, Humans would emerge. All the possibilities."

"What about Avians?" he asked. "Felines? Merlings? Elytrian? They look like you—I look like you; *humanoid*, as the Humans call it."

"Out of all the species in this galaxy," the second Starborne spoke up. "Avians are the closest to us of all."

Okay, well, news flash.

"Their *biology*, as they like to call it, gives them a dangerous sort of power. The Starborne that blew up their planet were afraid that they would grow power-hungry, though the Avians were the most

peaceful species of all."

"So it wasn't the Arachnids," he breathed out, the pieces clicking into place. "Just *you*."

"Not *us*," the first Starborne said. "The Universe had us eliminate the other Starborne who acted out of line." They shared a dangerous look. "But perhaps all can still be saved."

"Not the planet," Technoblade snarled. "It died long ago."

"No," the first Starborne said. "But all is not lost. The Avians can still be saved."

"How?" he choked out. "I only know three; there can't be more than ten others—"

"Perhaps," the first Starborne repeated, and Techno fell silent at that wordless implication. "All is not what it seems. Come, we must go —"

He said a Name. Not a *name*, but a Name, and Techno clapped a hand over his ears to stop his head from ringing.

"Shit, sorry," the first Starborne said as the whiteness cleared and Techno's pain went down to a standard rate. "I forgot that your frail ears are not used to such Words." And it wasn't *words*, Techno realized, but *Words*. "When we leave, we cannot hold back your madness."

"What?" he said slowly, picking at the blood that was trailing from his ears.

"Your madness," the first Starborne said. "The voices of your ancestors are behind held back by a thin barrier, erected by—" he glanced at the second Starborne. "—uh, Jimmy. It will break when we —"

"All the names," he said. "And you picked Jimmy?" Jimmy raised an eyebrow. "I mean, uh, no offense."

"None taken."

Techno breathed out in relief.

"Anyway," the first Starborne said, amusement tugging at his lips. "It will break when we leave. But you will heal, Technoblade. You will all heal."

"Could you have saved them?" he asked as *Jimmy* stood up and walked over to the first Starborne.

He turned. "Who?"

Technoblade gestured at the air. "Grian. Alyssa. Foolish. Sniff. Tommy's parents. My family. *Ranboo*."

"Not all," the first Starborne said. "The Universe did not pull at us, so we were not around to save their souls." He hesitated. "But if I had been there, I would have. I promise."

"I believe you," he said, and he was surprised to find he meant that.

"Most people forget," Jimmy interceded. "About us. They think it to be a miracle. You won't forget us."

"Is that a threat?" he asked.

"You'll be okay, Technoblade," the first Starborne said softly. "All in due time—he'll help you." He gestured at Tommy. "You need to trust him."

"I do," he said, casting a fond glance over the injured boy. If Wilbur were here—if, perhaps, the circumstances were better—he would have been called soft.

"You can remember me as Scott," the first Starborne said. "It was very nice to meet someone who can comprehend our philosophical past."

And then thunder rolled, and Technoblade looked away in time to see three quick strikes of lightning. When the flashes finally passed, all three beings were gone.

Silence.

There was a roar of blood in his ears.

The voices came back a thousandfold.

Drista had left an open commlink with Lani.

While technically illegal, there were a couple of ones Tubbo had hacked back when he had been interested in doing illegal things—technically, he still was; if Lani knew anything about her brother, but he was a bit more into *bombs* and taking down governments than commlinks.

Which, fair.

So Lani stood against the sidewall in Bay four, waiting for the return of the transport ship carrying Dream, Drista, Niki, Hannah, Sapnap and Rae. Ponk stood about twenty meters away, next to a medkit, a defibrillator, a bag of sterilized hyposprays, three moving I.V.s, and multiple bags of universal blood—perhaps some of it was Tommy's.

Philza was leaning against a different wall, his eyes closed, his mouth moving wordlessly as he telepathically communicated to his wife.

Nobody else was cleared to enter. Niki was communicating directly to Ponk, who was medically in charge of transmissions at the minute. Wilbur was, of course, pissed off—he'd been ranting about how *both of his brothers* were down there—news flash; Lani hadn't known that he'd considered them as such.

› *Come on...* ‹

Lani started quietly at the murmur in her ear; she was quite sure that Drista hadn't even realized she'd said it aloud.

› *Come on...where are you?* ‹

She bit her lip. Closed her eyes. Prayed to every God she could name. They had to be alive.

› *Tommy? You better be alive, you hear me?* ‹

› *Ranboo...please don't go away.* ‹

› *Techno. Techno, take care of them—Techno, I'll spar with you again, you can beat my ass—please be alive—* ‹

Tears blurred her eyes, and Lani held back a sob. It was her duty as a medical officer to have some kind of decorum—it was why she was allowed in the docking bay in the first place.

》》 *OH MY GOD, I SEE THEM—* ‹‹

Dream's shout echoed over the mic, and Lani's heart leaped in her throat. She glanced over at Ponk, who didn't have an open receiver and was pacing worriedly.

》 *Where is he? WHERE IS HE?* ‹

Lani bit down on her lip until she tasted blood.

She wondered if this was what it felt like, to be helpless.

》 *Why is he just lying there?* ‹

"Who?" she screamed, but she didn't have a mic, only a receiver, and Ponk startled and gave her a very odd look.

Please don't be dead, please don't be dead...I don't know who you are talking about, but please don't be dead...

› DREAM, NO! ‹

Lani shrieked loudly as she heard the echo of a gunshot, and the frantic panting of Drista, and she *did not know what was going on*. Ponk was starting towards her, and Phil had his wings tensed up, but neither of them knew, *neither of them knew*.

A second shot fired, and there was silence for a brief moment.

Then—

›› Hannah! Hand me the medkit! ‹‹

Niki's frantic voice, her superior officer, who needed the medkit because someone—two someones—could possibly be dead, and suddenly Lani understood Purpled's hate for helplessness and why he involved himself in everything.

› Dream— ‹

›› He'll live, Drista—Sapnap, you have to hit him in the throat, he's half-Piglin— ‹‹

"What's going on?" he asked, harsher than perhaps he should have. "What are they saying?"

She couldn't hide it; didn't want to hide it; didn't want to carry this pain alone. "Sapnap...is hitting Technoblade in the throat with something—I think Dream is down—"

"Fuck," Phil cursed, turning to Ponk. "Can you contact anyone?"

Ponk was shaking his head. "My mic was attached to Dream—although that might explain why he's no longer answering."

"Shit, okay," Philza said, turning back to Lani. "Can you convey everything that you're hearing?"

Her lower lip trembled. "Y-yes."

"What are they saying?"

"Sapnap got Techno," she mumbled, reaching up and scrubbing at her eyes. "Apparently, he's—down for the count, whatever that means. Dream is—"

》》 — *medical tricorder says that he's lost a lot of blood, we need to get him back to the L'manburg*— ‹‹

"*He's* losing blood," she whispered. "Someone's dying."

"*Fuck*," Philza hissed. "Okay. Okay." He ran a frantic hand through his hair. "Shots?"

"No more," she said. "Only the two."

"From who?"

"I don't know," she muttered, although her gut was saying that *Techno* had shot Dream, which made no sense because Techno was good; was her commander and senior officer. "It wasn't clear."

› *What about Tommy?* ‹

She stiffened. "Drista's talking about Tommy," she said. "He's there."

"What about Ranboo?" Phil asked frantically.

Lani shook her head. "No mention."

›› *I don't know. Hannah, can you—thanks—* ‹‹

"They're loading them aboard the transport ship," she said numbly. "Or...whoever's with them. Dream. Techno. Tommy. Ranboo."

› *Lani.* ‹

She startled. "Drista said my name."

› *Lani, if you're listening, we need a dermal regenerator—that's what Niki says— and a pulmonary support unit.* ‹

Lani ignored the giant sob that followed from her earpiece as she turned to Ponk. "Dermal regenerator, medical cots, a pulmonary support unit," she listed off. "Maybe an anabolic protoplaser while you're at it."

"Gotcha," Ponk said and left. Lani was just about to follow him, when Drista spoke again.

› *And—and Lani? You'll need two sedative hyposprays. Please. Trust me on this. I know they should only be used in emergencies, but...we'll need them.* ‹

Lani hesitated and then took off, pushing through the door and ignoring the rest of the crews' shouts—they were asking her what was *wrong*, but she had no time—

God, please be alive. A crackling silence filled her ear as Drista shattered her side of the comm, and Lani cried as she ran, chest heaving because she was a Shulker and couldn't, wasn't *meant* to run this far this fast.

Ponk had his arms full when she burst into the medbay's storeroom, pushing past him to type frantically at the lockbox that held the more temptatious medicines. The Human gave her a curious, careful look but swept out—because there was no *time*—and Lani managed to tear open the drawers in the lockbox and grab two sedatives that would put full-grown adults like Wilbur out for about two hours; would put Commander Technoblade out for about forty-five minutes—Piglin genetics—and would put her brother under for about seven hours.

She grasped them tightly in her fist, staring at them for a second. They looked so tiny in her hand—she was the shortest on the ship, standing at five feet and two inches, Drista and her brother coming in second.

Tears blurred her eyes. Lani slammed the lockbox shut, wanting to screech and kick and fall to her knees. She heard it beep as she left the room, teeth grinding and limbs shaking.

She was a medical professional. She would see many things—she would see the aftermath of war, Niki had warned her. She served aboard a warship. Battles raged in the galaxy.

She glanced at her digi-watch as she ran down the hallway, sprinting past Skeppy, who shouted something at her that she tuned out.

Eleven fifty-three P.M.

Saturday evening.

Lani cried and her lungs were hurting as she hurtled past her brother and Purpled, once more ignoring their shouts.

She was a medical professional.

She would see many things. This was only a first.

She was a medical professional.

She was not a child. Not anymore. She had gone on missions and seen the stars and fired a phaser at a target. She had screamed and laughed and cried and the last time she watched a movie had been the Hunger Games, back when they'd first met Tommy.

She shut the door behind her with a bang, searching with frantic eyes at the shuttle that was unloading in front of her.

"Solidify the door, Lani!" Philza snapped—actually snapped at her—and Lani gaped at him before slamming her hand on the button that turned the glass of the door opaque.

Purpled's angry magenta eyes lingered in her vision as she turned, blood turning cold at the shouts the echoed in the bay. Niki was screaming orders, and she met the Merling's frightened—*Niki was*

scared? Why was Niki scared?—eyes as the more experienced medical officer motioned for her to back off.

Eleven fifty-five.

Useless. She wrapped her arms around her sides as Sapnap dragged Drista, whose regular messy ponytail was even messier and half out, tears trailing down her face as she screamed enigmatic words into the already-raucous room. The Blazeborn grabbed the phaser wrapped tightly in Drista's hand, tugging it for a moment, eyes flashing with hidden fire before the teen released her weapon, stumbling over to Lani's side.

"Dream," her best friend sobbed, and Lani inhaled sharply. "He's—Techno shot him—"

And she was piecing together a story made for nightmares, now, as a hover-stretcher came down the ramp, pulled by Hannah, who looked worse for wear as Niki came stomping down the disembarkment ramp next to her, hands covered in *blood*, and snapping at Ponk.

"I.V., now," she said through gritted teeth. "I'm going to have to perform a minor operation now—he's lost too much blood; it hit a major artery." And Drista sobbed and Lani stood on her toes and saw blonde hair on the hover-stretcher, but it wasn't Tommy-blond; it was *Dream* -blond. "I need the tri-laser connector and the protoplaser, please—"

Lani tuned her out as she turned to look at the next body—no, she wouldn't think of it as bodies; they were still alive—exited the ship, and this time it was Technoblade, in another hover-stretcher, with a bandage wrapped around his shoulder; uniform torn in that place, being pushed by Sapnap, who looked shaky and scared as he placed Techno's hover-stretcher near Dream's.

Techno wasn't in any danger of dying because Niki hardly bothered to glance at him.

"I shot him," Drista said, hands shaking, green eyes wide. *Oh.*

And by all the Gods, this *was* a nightmare—

Eleven fifty-eight.

"LANI!" Nihachu shrieked, and Lani tugged herself out of Drista's harsh grip, dropping the sedatives into her friend's hands.

She was a medical professional.

She rushed over to Niki's side, wincing slightly at the mess that was dripping onto the floor—that was a phaser not of Arachnid nor Galactic Rebellion make that had hit Dream; he had a bloody gaping hole in his stomach—and it had appeared to have nicked the right gastric artery, not the celiac trunk, thank *God*, or he'd be dead.

She was a medical professional.

Not a single simulation had prepared her for the thick stench of blood to hang heavy in the air, nor the redness dripping from Niki's hands. Not a single simulation had prepared for the emotions to attempt to flicker past her mental fortitude and try to make her sink to the ground to try to take everything in.

"I need you to hold the skin together," Niki said through gritted teeth, and Lani gaped at her slightly. "Come on! Or he'll die!"

He might die anyway, is what she did not say, though Ponk, who was shouting blood levels and dealing with transfusions—something she was not technically yet cleared to do and had a mediocre level of knowledge about; after all, she was still a nurse-in-training—might've known anyway.

Lani gritted her teeth from her spot opposite of the repulser-lifted gurney as Niki lifted her tri-laster connector and laser scalpel, pink hair tied in a tight bun behind her head as she leaned over the unconscious Human.

Eleven-fifty nine.

The blood was warm in her hands as she squeezed the skin together, stopping some of the blood from escaping—it would be a shit surgery, and Niki would have to undo the work and do it better once Dream was stabilized, but it would have to work for now. She winced as the laser nicked her

finger, drawing a thin line of blood, but didn't draw back her hands, nor did Niki apologize, her mouth in a thin, concentrated line.

And her hands were covered in blood and sweat dripped from her brow and her chest was heaving when she saw Philza carry Tommy down the ramp of the ship, gauze bandages covering his arms and his chest, where the uniform was ripped.

He was not dead; otherwise, Philza would not look so frantic, so protective, his wings half-wrapped around the youngest boy, his blonde hair sandy and dirty, and a horrible grimace covering his face.

Twelve.

Sunday. It was Sunday now.

And as Ponk said the final vital lines and Niki stepped back, nodding, and as Lani drew back as well, what seemed like gallons of blood covering her hands and the sleeves of her uniform, she realized what was wrong—what should have been so obvious, but in her panic, she had missed.

Ranboo wasn't there, and Ranboo wasn't coming, and *where was he?*

Valkyrae sat in the console of the ship, her head in her hands. As Lani made her way up the ramp, the Avian looked up at her. Their eyes met.

Rae was the first one to look away. Lani ran back down the gangplank.

Hannah and Sapnap were hovering anxiously, the Blazeborn murmuring something to a sobbing Drista under his breath. Dream was stabilized, and Philza had lain Tommy on the final remaining cot, touching up one of his burn bandages that had slipped to reveal blackened skin and yellow pus and spiky lines of awfulness that made her sick—what could have caused that?—and Lani dripped blood everywhere. Niki shouted her name as horror filled her heart and she ran down the ramp to kneel by Tommy's side.

He was awake, now. Or, at least, *coherent*, blue eyes misty as Philza's comforting words trailed off at her bloody entrance.

"Ranboo," she gasped, and maybe her first words should have been, *I'm glad to see you're okay or you'll live*, but Ranboo was like a sibling to her, who was platonically married to her brother, and whose dual-colored eyes saw more than they should have—had seen, in his time, more than they should have. And Tommy was alive, and Ranboo wasn't here—and if she knew anything about the survivors of the Children's Rebellion, it was that Tommy would never have left Ranboo willingly. "Where is he?"

And Tommy looked at her with greyed-out eyes and gave the one-word answer that she hadn't wanted to hear.

"Dead," he croaked out, and Lani's heart dropped and she drew away, glancing at the door, suddenly realizing why Drista had asked for sedatives—

—and Tubbo was a genius, of course he was; he'd been the earliest member of the school ever to graduate and become a Lieutenant this young, and so she was not entirely surprised to see him burst through the door, a screwdriver and a datapad in one hand, Purpled right behind him.

She was covered in blood and kneeling by Tommy's side and Tubbo was looking frantically around the room for someone that would never grace their visions again—and Tubbo knew; was more brilliant than she'd ever be, and saw the tears on her face as Tommy fell unconscious once more.

"PURPLED—" Ponk shouted furiously, and she'd *never* heard Ponk raise his voice like that.

"TUBBO UNDERSCORE!" Niki screamed, enraged. "GET THE HELL OUT OF—"

Lani got up and sprinted over to Drista, who was furiously wiping at the tears in her eyes. She grabbed the sedatives from her best friend's hands, wincing at the bloody handprint that was now wrapped around Drista's wrist when she'd pried the fingers open.

Purpled was by Tommy's side, and he knew, he *knew*, *he knew*—his eyes were alight with hidden fire as Lani stored the sedatives in her dimensional space and dashed towards him, his furious magenta eyes meeting hers—

"He's dead, isn't he," the Human boy said, and it wasn't quite a question, and it was broken and awful and violent. "I'm going to fucking *kill him*—"

There was no doubt who he was talking about. Lani hadn't even had to nod.

She reached upwards, and he didn't expect it, didn't see it coming, and she took out the hypospray and clicked the end, jamming it into his neck with a grimace.

Trust.

What little they'd had—how little he trusted—and she'd broken it.

But they knew; she knew, that Purpled would have done something *foolish*. Would have stolen a ship and flown off to kill Chroma because he was a hypocrite, just to get revenge. Because no matter how many times he told Tommy that he shouldn't have done that in Pogtopia, he would have done the same thing.

She'd known him for two years. She knew him well enough.

It was almost picturesque to see him lying slumped by Tommy's side, as if he was sleeping. Gentle. As if nothing had changed, as if he would wake up and joke about the Children's Rebellion—like he always did, complete with a slight grimace that accompanied such dark humor.

As if half hadn't become a third.

She turned to her brother next, whom Drista had grabbed and whose arms were being held behind his back by the Human girl, datapad shattered on the floor—both of them were crying and Drista was saying something as Tubbo tugged against her grip, screaming, looking as if his world had been utterly destroyed.

It probably had been.

"NO!"

She heard it, over the din. A pleading cry for someone to come back—someone that would never be there again.

"RANBOO!"

Heartbreak lasted a lifetime. She saw it in the haunted eyes of those that had survived the Children's Rebellion; she saw it in Philza and Dream when they talked about missions past; she saw it in Niki when the Merling explained that not everyone could be saved.

"RANBOO!"

Grief—horrible, awful grief—that was the price of love. That was the price of laughter.

She knew things would get worst from this moment—that this was only the screaming, and after would come the silence. From her brother and from Purpled and Tommy. She, too, would be quiet, and later she would sit on her bed and sob into empty hands that had once been stained with blood. And Drista would stare into space at her medically-comatose brother and stare and stare and stare.

But then was not now, and now she met Drista's terrified eyes over the shoulder of her brother and knew that he would do something worse than Purpled in his fit of anger and fear and heartbreak.

Things would never be as they once were.

Lani stared into her brother's anguished eyes and slipped the sedative into his neck.

He collapsed into Drista's arms like an old dam giving out; boneless and like running water, and Lani fell to her knees next to him, feeling for a pulse she knew was there, even as blood made pathing trails in her hands and tears rained down upon the cold, cold floor.

She met her best friend's mourning eyes, and a ghastly smile twisted at her lips as she relinquished her grip on her brother's form, leaving the drying blood trails to form rivers in his skin.

Twelve-oh-four.

"Happy birthday to me," she whispered. "Happy fucking birthday to me."

guns, am i right

Chapter Notes

I have never put a warning on a chapter in this fic before.

There is one in this one.

Not specifically, but please go back and shove your face into the warnings and the tags. Read them carefully. Read them cautiously. Read them to yourself in the mirror. And above all else, READ THEM. Please.

This chapter is by far the darkest chapter in the entire fic.

Please heed the warnings.

*"If respect is the only thing protecting you
from a knife in the back; respect is nothing, right?"*
-c!Dream, the DSMP

He floated in a black void, hardly aware that he was conscious, and wished for Death to come to take him away from the world of the living. Like a bad dream of memories and death, he lay, waiting for the life to fade from him like water from a puddle after a rainy day.

Whispers assaulted his mind. Tommy tried to tune them out, but they managed to pierce his shadowy walls and disturb him further. Covering his ears did no help, because this was his unconscious mind, and the people talking were over his body.

"—be alright?"

"I don't know, Wil."

"Why won't he wake up?"

"Could be a multitude of reasons. I'd have to say prolonged trauma, though."

"He's already been through trauma—"

"And we don't know how he fared after the Children's Rebellion or his parents' death. Nobody was there."

"And now he's catatonic."

"...now he's catatonic."

"What about Tubbo?"

"He's not eating. Nor sleeping much either, I think."

"Purpled?"

"He's mad. I had Phil take away his influences with Clementine. Just to be safe."

"Lani? Drista?"

"I don't—"

He was drowning. He was drowning in quicksand, in endless water, in an ocean that choked him with salt and brine, and he could not breathe. He did not want to breathe.

Yet his lungs, against all odds, continued to draw in air.

"They found out about Techno."

"What? How?"

"I have no idea, but an investigator is arriving in about three days. If he's not rational..."

"But that's not fair!"

"No, it's not. Toast has been arguing harshly against it — that's why they haven't found our coordinates sooner. It's been four days already, Niki, and I'm just praying we find out whatever's wrong with him before then."

"WRONG? He hears voices, Phil! He's attacking people because of them! They're controlling him! We know what's wrong with him...there just isn't anything we can do about it. Not yet. There isn't a cure; not according to every Piglin that's willing to speak to me—all the iste'nrsłây die after hearing the supposed Blood Gods' voices; they go mad—"

"He's still in there, Niki! I can see it in his eyes—"

I know you think you know your son, Phil—"

"I DO KNOW MY SON!"

"—what if he's like that for the rest of his life? Attacking people, growling—acting like...like an animal."

"He won't be, he can't—"

"Phil."

"..."

"We don't know what Chroma did to them—we have a good idea because George found trace amounts of adryltin in his veins."

"Liquid pain."

"We know he was tortured—and something broke. For fucks sake, I found the internal side effects of golden apples in Tommy—and he's afraid of me; he wouldn't eat it unless he was forced to. I know you want everything to be like it was, but Ranboo's gone, Tommy's comatose, and your eldest is going to be taken to an asylum if we don't figure out a solution."

"I won't let Chroma ruin two of my sons' lives, Niki."

"Well, you're going to have to accept it, because he already did."

The grief was nearly unbearable. Every time a thought trickled through his head, it was of those who he had failed to save: nameless children, *faceless* children, his family, his friends.

He wanted to die.

Somehow, saying that brought little worry.

"Tommy, you need to wake up."

"I don't think he can hear you, Purpled."

"Didn't they say that people in a coma can hear everything?"

"...maybe, but Lani only said that it'd help speed the recovery process."

"You're not telling me something, Drista."

"You don't know that."

"I know you, miss child spy. Lie all you want; you can't hide things from me that easily."

"Fine. I heard Niki and Ponk talking. They say that as the days pass, his chances of waking up decrease exponentially."

"Tommy is the most stubborn person I've met. If anyone can do it, he can."

"He's lived through his parents dying, a war-prison, Pogtopia, the Children's Rebellion, Snifferish dying, and now Ranboo. How much more do you think he can take?"

"We're all on suicide watch by the adults anyway; what's another one?"

"That's not very lighthearted of you."

"These aren't very lighthearted times."

"...sometimes I think there's a reason why children aren't allowed in space, Purpled."

"Perhaps. But I think it's only this ship. And only because of us, too."

"Don't say that, you jerk. I wouldn't leave you even if I knew in a few months I'd die a painful death because of Chroma."

"That's touching, Drista."

"I know, I'm cool like that."

"Okay, you've been spending far too much time with Tommy. You're picking up on his sayings."

"That's how a person's memories are kept alive...innit?"

Tommy woke up.

Somehow, his mind knew that it was the middle of the night, and when he turned his head slightly to look over at the cot next to him. He was in the medical bay, of course he was, with a feeding tube down his nose and an I.V. in the inside of his elbow.

He was back on the *L'manburg*. His dreams hadn't been dreams.

Tubbo lay on the cot next to him, back facing Tommy, completely still. Tommy lifted his head slightly to stare at the boy, wondering if he was dead.

Wait, no, Niki didn't keep dead bodies in the medbay.

Dead bodies.

Ranboo.

Tommy slapped a hand over his mouth as he choked out a sob, and Tubbo shifted, rolling over to face him. In the medical-dim lights of the medbay, Tommy stared tearily into the eyes of the brown-eyed Shulker, wondering where it had all gone wrong—wondering when Tubbo had started look so dull.

"You didn't save him," the boy whispered, and Tommy questioned why Clementine wasn't alerting any of the crew to him being awake—because he *had* been in a coma for a couple of days, right? They *did* care...right?

He swallowed and removed his hand from his mouth. "No," he said hoarsely. "I didn't." *I couldn't've*, was what he did not say. *He made his choice*, was also what he did not say. Because a

promise was a promise, no matter what happened.

"You promised," Tubbo said—whispered, really. "You promised that he would come back."

Did I? Tommy thought dimly. "I was wrong," he said through a thick tongue.

"It's your fault," Tubbo said in a low voice, the hate in his voice making Tommy recoil slightly. The young Shulker's eyes were filled with furious tears as he scrubs at his face. "You should have saved him."

He jumped in front of the bullet.

He said, "I should've." Maybe if he'd been better.

"I hate you," Tubbo whispered, and wow, that fucking hurt. "You should've d—"

Tommy left before Tubbo spoke the words that would've broken their carefully bridged friendship forever. Wincing at the tug of the bandages over his shoulders and pretending he could feel the quarter of the hand where he'd pulled out of his cuffs, he shut the door behind him. When no alarms blared—when neither Niki, Lani, or Ponk came rushing—he wondered if anyone cared about him.

There was a lump in his throat the size of an apple as he swallowed, Tubbo's nasty grief-induced words lingering in his mind. *It's okay*, he told himself. *Tubbo was just — lashing out at you. Yeah. He's grieving for his best — husband. Whatever. He can do that.*

Then—

I deserve it anyway.

Tommy shoved his hands in the pockets of his uniform; new and no longer torn, wondering who'd put it on him and why the fuck his back and arms hurt so much—all he remembered was crashing

relief as Chroma walked away and then stepping down from the dune of sand only for a blinding hot light to fill his vision.

And then...this. This horrible crushing sense of waking up and realizing one of your closest friends was *dead*, and then listening as another one of your friends opened his mouth and—rightly so—blamed you for his death. This horrible weight on his shoulders—and no, it wasn't the white bandages covering his trapezius and delta and—oh, Ranboo taught him that.

Tommy cried. He wasn't ashamed to admit it; he'd lost his embarrassment in crying a long, long time ago. He cried for friends lost, and child soldiers made, and he cried because he still breathed when ninety percent of his friends were dead, when he could have saved them and didn't—if he'd made better choices, maybe he'd be dead with them. Maybe they'd be happy together.

He was standing in front of a random door on a random level, and Clementine was silent and the hallways were silent—what was wrong with the ship? Where was everyone? It felt like a ghost. Empty.

He felt the same way.

He opened the door with a shaky press of his fingerpads and revealed a small sitting room, not unlike the one he'd sat in with Purpled and Ranboo what seemed like a bajillion years ago. It was different—the couches were a brilliant lapis blue, and they were larger and there were three of them, and he was pretty sure they were sectional couches or whatever.

Also, this must've been one of the five rooms that were Phantom-proofed, based on the tacky electrical sheeting that was scattered across the walls, emitting blinking blue lights. Tommy was sort of glad of that—for absolutely no particular reason, as he threw himself onto the soft couches and buried his face in the pillow.

He breathed in. Breathed out.

The pain didn't leave him. Actually, the air didn't even leave him, because his face was stuffed into a pillow, and, contrary to popular belief, one couldn't actually breathe through those. Tommy grumbled and propped his nose on top of the pillow casing, his mouth and jaw still hidden.

And in the blue glow of the electrified Phantom-proof walls and the dim regulation-night-level lights of the paneled lamps, Tommy spotted the flash of metal on a dusty corner table between two side couches.

Tommy raised his head slightly, the hair on the back of his neck rising. He rolled off the couch, wincing slightly at the tug of his muscles and the fundamental inability to use his left hand as he got to his feet, tilting his head at the grey and black *phaser* that lay on the table, gleaming in the darkness. And it was horrible silence that filled his mind, then.

He walked towards it like a bee drawn to honey.

Like a child drawn to a trap.

Tommy put his hand on it, turning it in his grip. His fingerprints made trails in grimy dust—clearly, it had been here for a few weeks, forgotten. Dimly, he knew it was nothing like the gun that had murdered Ranboo and Grian and Alyssa and Foolish—that it was nothing like the one that Chroma had carried; the Avians' was some sort of mad modifications that was unique to his side—nothing of Galactic Rebellion or Arachnid make; and the one that he was holding was clearly Galactic Rebellion, probably taken from the weapons room by someone with clearance and left by pure accident.

Haunting.

His left hand could not hold anything, and so Tommy held it in his right, his final three fingers curled around the grip, his pointer finger near the equipment rail, and his thumb tracing the cocking indicator. He numbly remembered Drista spouting off the parts of a gun with a grin on her face while they were doing some sort of maths homework.

Tubbo's biting words filled his head—even though he hadn't heard the Shulker's damning words, he knew what he'd been about to say.

You should have died instead.

The words hurt, but they were right. He should have died before Ranboo. He didn't know whether it was luck or unluckiness that he was still walking numbly around in a place he no longer wanted to

venture.

The cartridge was half-charged, he realized. Enough for about eight shots before it'd need an overheat break.

He should put the gun down.

Tommy clicked back the safety instead, his mouth slightly parted, his feet supporting his shaking weight as he stared dumbly at the weapon in his hand. The *click* filled the air, like a countdown that would end in death.

It was like—like dragons to gold, from fairytales—enrapturement in something he wanted to tear his gaze away from. Mesmerizing.

Do I want to die? he asked himself numbly. *Right here? Right now?*

It'd take them hours to find his body.

Maybe Tubbo would be happy. He knew that *he* would be.

The metal of the gun was cold, even under the touch of his fingers, and he shivered slightly, even though the room was room temperature. The small light that told him the percentage of the cartridge swam in his eyes, his hair falling over his eyes ever so slightly, greasy and unwashed.

He swallowed thickly.

He wanted to go home.

The *L'manburg* was home, but he wanted his family again. He had lost so much in so little a span of time—about seven years, give or take a few months—and he wanted peace; he wanted the pain to end.

He knew that by dying, he would be passing his pain on to the survivors, to those who were alive and knew him—but they'd get over it in a few months, though maybe Purpled would take a year or two. Then it would all be okay again, and the galaxy would spin without one Tommy Innes in it anyway.

No more pain. No more hate. No more torture; no more watching his friends die, helpless to do anything but scream. No more Chroma, no more *running*.

Tommy breathed in. Breathed out. His hands shook, sending lances of pain up into his head. This would all be over. Just a few more seconds.

He lifted the muzzle of the gun to the side of his head. It was cold. Freezing. It signified everything he wanted and hated—*death, death, death*—and why wasn't he squeezing the trigger, why couldn't his finger move—

"Tommy."

He spun, mouth widening in surprise and tearing the *thing* away from his head and down to his side, as if he could possibly hide an attempt away from someone who had always been far more observant than him.

Purpled stood in the doorway, his silhouette framed in light as he stepped into the room, one careful placement of his boots at a time, a wary light in his eyes. Tommy stared at him, slightly dumbstruck.

"Don't—" he gasped out, stumbling back. Purpled raised a blonde eyebrow, magenta eyes unreadable as he prowled towards Tommy until there was nothing in between them except for a glass coffee table that reached their shins.

"Don't what?" Purpled said, voice unreadable. "Come any closer? Stop you from killing yourself?"

Tommy glanced away from his friend, shame rising in his chest. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

"Well, if you insist," Purpled said, when he didn't answer, and stepped back. Tommy's head jerked up to stare at him in surprise. "Go on. Shoot yourself."

"What...?" he asked, dumbstruck.

"Shoot yourself," Purpled said, his lips in a thin line that twisted dangerously with every word he spoke. Tommy stared at him, jaw slack. "And then when you're gone and the crew's been alerted—Clementine just completed her software update, by the way, you have *impeccable* timing—I'll pick up the gun and shoot myself in the head. Then the Children's Rebellion will be gone. Chroma will win, even if, in the end, he loses. Just like that."

Tommy was far too much in shock to properly understand the Human boy. "Huh?" he spluttered. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You shoot yourself, Tommy Innes," Purpled said, still, somehow, deathly calm. "And I'll follow you right into the grave of your own creation." He tilted his chin up slightly so that magenta met cyan, and Tommy saw the absolute seriousness that lay there—and the slight tinge of madness that drifted in the eyes of all the survivors of the Children's Rebellion. "None of the deaths so far have been your fault, but I am telling you this now—this one will be." Tommy merely blinked at him. "Cause and effect."

"This is blackmail," Tommy pointed out.

Purpled tilted his head, glancing up at the ceiling. "Perhaps," he admitted. "Okay, yeah, it is."

"Some dark, twisted fucking version of blackmail," Tommy said, staring at him. "*You kill yourself, and I'll kill myself as well, and it'll be your fault,*' what the fuck, man?"

"I'm just saying," Purpled said. "It's not your fault that they died—"

'They' could have been anybody. That could have been his parents; that could have been Sniff—that could have been Ranboo or Alyssa or Grian or Foolish or any other children that had once lived in

Pogtopia. 'They' could have been Puffy or Clementine—though perhaps the last one was a bit of a stretch.

"—and *don't* start with that bullshit of if you could have prevented it—you loved your friends, Tommy, and I loved them too, and if you could have prevented it, you would have. Trust me. Trust yourself. You did everything in your power, and it may not have been enough—but if you couldn't save them, then I couldn't have either." Purpled shook his head. "But you can blame yourself for my death, Tommy, because the solution to *me* not dying today is simple— *don't pull that trigger*."

"Why?" he asked, sneering slightly. "Because I have so much to live for?"

"No," Purpled said, grinning wickedly. "Because there's someone out there who deserves to go through an awful amount of pain before *he* dies, and there's someone that we need to kill before *we* die. And nobody is going to steal our kill, especially not that phaser in your hands that'll take both of our lives if you pull that trigger."

He believed it. He believed that if he died, Purpled would as well; would follow him to the grave with a stone-cold face and an even colder heart.

"Chroma," Tommy said.

"Chroma."

Tommy stared at the gun in his hands for a second. "Alright," he said, dropping the gun. Both boys watched as it hit the ground with a sickening clatter, and Purpled snorted and walked around the table to kick the weapon under the couch. "I'm in for a little bit of revenge."

Purpled scrunched his nose. "Revenge sounds so simple," he complained. "I prefer calling it *returning the fucking favor*."

"What happened to an eye for an eye makes the world blind?" Tommy said snidely.

Purpled waved a hand flippantly. "Only us and him," he said. "The others can keep their eyes."

Tommy was silent for a moment, thinking. Without the weapon in his hand, he felt strangely empty. "And after?" he said.

Purpled looked up at him from where he stood by Tommy's side. "After what?"

"After it's over," Tommy said, swallowing thickly. "If we survive killing Chroma. If we live. Then what?"

Purpled was silent for a moment, the blue lights of the electrics on the walls making his eyes glitter violet. "Then I guess we can die," he said.

Tommy grinned fiercely and held out a hand. "It's a deal," he said, as if this wasn't some kind of sick suicide pact that would horrify just about everyone on the ship—because he'd known that Purpled was far too much like him for it to be healthy, and perhaps Purpled had had the support of family coming off of Pogtopia, which is why Tommy had seemed worse at first. "Revenge is a kind of wild justice, innit?" They'd both lost Ranboo in the end. Many people had lost Ranboo.

"Living on is the best revenge," Purpled corrected. "But I suppose living on to spite someone isn't really living, especially if we kill them. Revenge is satisfying anyway."

"To the bitter end, then, I suppose," Tommy said, and Purpled smirked up at him and clasped his hand. He ignored the bite of pain and shook the Human's hand.

"To the bitter end."

I'm 'allucinating 'n shit

Chapter Notes

sooooo this should have been uploaded like 6 hours ago, but Aria decided to paint her laptop on Christmas Eve (???????????) and then her mom ran over it when she got back from the grocery store.

Then I got in my car and drove for the first time since my (second? third? idk) accident and I got her a laptop from best buy :DDDD

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

- Juliet & Aria

"A villain is just a hero that you

haven't convinced yet."

- Ghostbur, the DSMP

Not five seconds later, Niki burst into the room, catching the pair clasping hands and looking like deer caught in headlights, if deer weren't extinct on Earth and headlights were still the primary light used on vehicles.

"Oh my God," the Merling said, as Purpled and Tommy both stared at her, half in disbelief.

"Clementine goes down for *ten minutes*, and Tommy wakes up—and then both of you fucking go missing, and we think—" she cut herself off, glancing around the room hesitantly.

"What?" Tommy said harshly as he took his hand back from Purpled. "We'd killed ourselves?"

Purpled stepped lightly on his toes, and Tommy tried to pretend that there wasn't a weapon under the nearest couch—and that he might've, if the Human boy hadn't...*convinced* him not to.

Blackmailed was a better word.

Niki, despite being shorter and bearing pink and brown hair—the roots were beginning to show—eyed Tommy. "Yes," she said cautiously.

Tommy snorted and threw himself back on the couch. "Fair enough," he muttered.

Niki tsked. "Don't do that," she said in annoyance. "Your bandages will get messed up." Tommy raised an eyebrow, as if to ask *do I give a fuck*, and Niki crossed her arms. "Don't pull that look with me, mister. I already have enough shit on my hands without dealing with two rogue children that may or may not have a death wish." She beckoned with one hand. "Come on, back to the medbay we go."

"We?" Purpled asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You too, Purpled," Niki said. "I'd rather have all the kids in one place, thank you very much."

"Ranboo's dead," Tommy said, the words slipping out like foam over a waterfall. Niki froze suddenly, though, by the sadness that lingered in her eyes as she met Tommy's, she'd already known. "Tubbo—he—yeah."

"Freaked out?" Purpled asked.

Tommy shrugged. "I guess."

Niki frowned. "He's been basically catatonic for a while," she said. "After—you know. You got back."

"What happened?" Tommy asked, finally getting up and following the Merling out of the blue-lit room, Purpled firmly at his heels. "All I remember is a really bright light and then falling off a sand dune."

"Pretty sure you got struck by lightning, if the burns say anything," Niki said, with a wary grimace. "As for what happened...I have no idea." She eyed Tommy. "Techno went batshit crazy—still is, if you're wondering."

"Oh," Tommy said, swallowing down the lump in his throat. "He was fine when Charlie rescued us."

"Who?" Purpled asked sharply.

Tommy gestured widely, dropping his hand back to his side when the bandages tugged at his injured hand. "Charlie. Green-eyed guy with glasses. Brown hair. He not around?"

Niki shook her head slowly. "Tommy, there was nobody there except for you and Techno when the transport arrived."

"Oh," he said, his voice small. "Maybe I was 'allucinating him."

"For all your problems, Tommy, hallucinations ain't one of 'em," Purpled said.

"Purpled," Niki snapped. "Don't say that!"

"What? It's true!"

"Fair enough," Tommy pointed out, dissolving the argument. "This is a mess."

"It really is," Niki said quietly. "We have a guy coming in from Command in two days—if he's not back to his norm..." she trailed off.

Tommy felt his hands clench into fists. "They're going to take him, aren't they?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," Niki said. "They are."

"Racist fucking bastards," Purpled snarled. When Tommy and Niki both looked at him, he said, "What? We were all thinking it."

"Only you said it," Tommy said with a slight smirk.

"I don't even know what's wrong with him," Niki said. "He shot Dream—" Tommy's blood ran cold. "—and keeps talking to people that aren't there and will attack anyone that enters the—the room—"

"It's a glorified cell," Purpled said.

Niki raised no objections. "—we put him in, but somehow you were fine on the beach—well, not fine, but he hadn't shot you or anything, and neither Phil nor Wil can get to him, and I have *no idea what's wrong*—"

"Hey, Niki," he said soothingly. "It's not your fault." Niki raised a tear-filled vision to look at him. "It's not, I swear."

"Hypocrite," Purpled muttered. Tommy stopped walking for a second to elbow the Human in the chest, who just raised an eyebrow. "Weakling."

"I'll show *you*," he snarled playfully, his chest tight.

"Tommy," Niki said tiredly, and Tommy stopped. "Come on."

He stared at the door of medbay for a second as Niki pressed her hand against the entrance—*now* it was locked; that made no sense—and the door opened. His face twisted in a slight grimace when his eyes and Tubbo's met, and the two looked away from each other, neither of them saying a word as Tommy entered medbay.

"Oh, thank fucking God," Wilbur said, and Tommy turned to look at him from where he was sitting on the edge of a medical bed, his elbows on his knees and his palms pressed into his cheeks. He also looked like he hadn't slept in years.

"Don't worry," Purpled drawled, as Tommy sat down on his cot—it *was* his, now; he'd sat in it too many times for it not to have a permanent name on the edge of it. "Tommy and I were having a little...chat."

"I'm sure you were," Drista said dryly from where she was perched on a table, Lani leaning on it next to her. Both of them had the same dark eyebags that Wilbur and Niki—actually, that everyone bore. Tubbo still wasn't making direct eye contact.

"Oh, yeah, that reminds me," Wilbur said, snapping his fingers. He drew out a comm from his belt. "Phil, we found Tommy."

› *Thank goodness, mate.* ‹

Wilbur's brown eyes met Tommy, and he noted that they were red from shed tears. "How's Tech doing?"

› *Same as he's been for the past hours. No improvement.* ‹

Wilbur put away the comm. "They can't take him away," Tommy said. "That's not fair."

"Life's not fair," Purpled snapped. "You, of all people—"

"*I* of all people?" he snarled. "*I*, of all people?!"

Purpled's unsettling magenta eyes stared him down. "Yes, Tommy. You, of all people, should know that life isn't far."

He let out a choked sob and put his head in his hands. "God, I hate this."

"Yeah," Purpled whispered. "I hate this too." He looked miserable. Everyone looked miserable.

"I miss 'Boo," Tubbo murmured, speaking up for the first time—well, the first time since he'd essentially blamed Tommy for Ranboo's death; rightly so.

"I know," Tommy said. "I'm sorry." Niki made a noise of disagreement.

Tubbo's large red-rimmed eyes looked up from staring at the sheets. "What happened?" he asked. "Why'd he die?"

"Chroma killed him," Tommy said, and anger flashed through Tubbo's eyes. "Not intentionally."

"What do you mean, *not intentionally*?" the Shulker asked through gritted teeth, looking pained—and if everyone else in the room was quiet in order to let the tension drain, Tommy didn't know.

"Chroma was supposed to kill Technoblade," Tommy admitted, and Wilbur sucked in a sharp breath. "Well, he was *going* to kill Techno. Piece of racist shit 'bout it too. Ranboo teleported right in front of the bullet."

Realization flooded Tubbo's eyes, and his mouth opened slightly, remembering their conversation from earlier. "Sorry," he whispered.

"s okay," Tommy said, rolling his shoulders. "Grief is a horrible weapon to wield."

"Then what happened?" Wilbur interjected, and Tommy flinched slightly. "Uh, you don't have—"

"No," he said. "It's fine." He felt detached. Cold. "They uh—bunch of people came in and tortured Techno." Niki bit her lip and looked away, closing her eyes, and Wilbur's hands clenched into fists as he lost what little hold he had on his physical form and flashed into the ghostly Phantom version of himself that Tommy rarely saw. "They—I was in a different room—there was two-sided glass between us or some shit—and they kept telling Techno that I was dead or dying and I couldn't do anything." He let out a breath, and laughed sullenly. "Helplessness, innit? Always been my downfall." Nobody laughed with him. "They accidentally stopped his heart, too. I had to watch as they revived him or whatever with their grimy hands. And then Chroma came to brag and I was so *angry* that I sort of ripped my hand straight through the manacle and tore the muscles and shit." He raised his bandaged hand.

Niki stared at him, and Tommy had a sinking feeling in his chest. "You know that's not going to heal properly, right?" she said, as kindly as she could.

"Yeah," he said emotionlessly. "I guess the lightning burn made it worse."

"Yeah, that and the golden apple."

"I thought that'd help," Tommy blinked. "I was bleeding out. To death."

"Then I suppose it did," the Merling said frostily.

"Would you rather that I be dead, then?" he snapped. "Because I would." Wilbur flinched, looking away—looking as if all he wanted to do was hug Tommy, but didn't move closer.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Niki said, tilting her chin pointedly. Purpled snorted. "But you'll never have full-range motion of your hand again."

"There go my piloting dreams," he muttered, kicking at a nonexistent rock.

"Please, that's not how that works," Drista said. "You're not getting out of that *that* easily." Tommy flipped her off with his right hand—his good hand.

But he wasn't angry. He was just...sad. Sad that so many people he knew were gone behind a curtain he could not reach, in a place that he, too, would arrive one day.

But not now.

"Charlie rescued us," he continued. "He was Human...or not. Not an Avian, but Human-passing. So I'm assuming Human unless he's like Sniff and his wings were cut off from Elytrian traffickers." Phil winced slightly, and Tommy ignored the memories and forged on. "He got the other cuff off my wrist and never explained how he got on the planet. Or why he was there. Or why he knew *we* were there. Then he sort of...got attacked by Techno and I managed to calm Techno down, so then they grabbed phasers, shot a bunch of scientists, and we walked out the door." He shrugged.

"And...Techno was fine?" Phil asked quietly.

"Yep," he said, popping the p. "Well, actually, as fine as someone who was tortured can be. Not *perfect*, but not how you describe him. We could safely interact, anyway."

"This is a mess," Wilbur groaned, pulling one knee up to his chest and pushing his glasses back onto his face—Tommy'd tried them on once; they were purely for looks, which is why he didn't wear them often except to fiddle with them.

"It really is," Drista said in a low voice.

"Oh," Tommy said, snapping the fingers on his right hand. "How's Dream doing?"

"Fully recovered," Niki interjected. "He was out of the medbay within twenty-four hours, with instructions *I know he would follow* not to push himself too hard." She gave Tommy a pointed look.

"It's not my fault that I girlbossed my way out of it," he said flippantly.

Purpled groaned as Drista snickered and Niki rolled her eyes. "Please never say that again," he begged. "Clementine does an update for *ten minutes*, and out of any of the times for you to wake up after three days—it had to be then." He shook his head. "You're the master of poor timing, Tommy."

"That has a double meaning behind it," he said with a scowl.

"Of course it does," Purpled said. "I'm me."

He had another tracker embedded in his arm. Tubbo and Purpled and Lani and Drista did, too, though the former two grumbled about it. Tommy thought it was just for precautions, though.

Currently, he was under the silent supervision of Valkyrae, who'd hugged him and said some tender words before making him laugh with a wisecrack—and no more, though obviously she knew what was happening. Tommy had asked her why she and Sykkuno were on the *L'manburg* instead of the *Mira*, and she'd smiled and said that it was *for him*, and somehow those words, mixed with love through their Avian bond, meant so much to him that he'd burst into tears over everything that had happened...again.

They'd be leaving at the end of the week, though. The *L'manburg* and the *Mira* would be meeting up a day after Command was going to take Techno—and Tommy couldn't do anything but watch as George and Jack shouted medical formulas at each other, their voices growing more and more frantic as Dream added his input, his shirt torn to reveal bandages on his upper arm. Niki corrected them with a sharp note in her voice as they poured over notes, and Wilbur and Philza were constantly reading history books about Piglins and madness. Kristin could be seen wandering the ship and talking to herself about laws and customs to try to stop Command from taking Technoblade away from them.

Sometimes Tubbo interjected. Sometimes Purpled burst in with the newest passage on his datapad that made his eyes light up and sent the exhausted scientists and medical officers into another bout of talking that Tommy could only pretend to understand. Sometimes Lani corrected Niki quietly, glancing at the space on Niki's right side that another junior nurse had once stood at.

But Tommy could never interject things because this was beyond his realm of expertise. Sometimes Drista would sit on the medical cots next to him—he was all but banned from sleeping in his room alone—and maybe he was okay with that because he would awake and hear the quiet breathing of his friends and be reminded he hadn't failed them yet. She would lean her head on his shoulder, and they would stare into space and listen to words they didn't quite understand, and they would pray that Techno could somehow be healed.

Tommy wasn't allowed to see him.

Maybe he was a coward, but he was okay with that—if only because the Commander was another failure of his. When Karl came back with claw marks on his arm, shaking, Sapnap volunteered to take the meals instead, and Tommy leaned his head back against the side of the ship and wondered what a mess this was.

Hours passed. Niki started snapping at everyone—in a mean way, not in the motherly way she usually did. Wilbur got agitated, and Tommy ran from him when the Phantom yelled at him. He saw the immediate apologetic look in Wilbur's eyes. Still, he ran anyway, back to his room, where Rae poked her head in, and saw him with Mellohi and Ca'jat curled around him, reading—he was always reading, nowadays, because reading wasn't real life, and he could pretend he was Percy Jackson fighting Gods and winning. She sat down in a chair and withdrew her datapad, not saying a word—but her presence was all that was needed, and Tommy knew he wasn't really trusted with alone time anyway. She must've sent a message to the bridge crew, too, because nobody came searching for him, demanding to know if he's offed himself in some forgotten corner of the ship—hadn't, of course.

(Not yet.)

Tommy flipped onto the final page of the book, eyes tracing the four paragraphs that remained.

His bandages should have gotten removed more than twenty-four hours ago. They hadn't, and Tommy hadn't cared that they were forgotten—even if he desperately wanted to know the state of his back and hand—because they were working for something that would affect the future of the *L'manburg*, something more critical than forever-scars and an aching hand.

He read on.

She nodded, though she still seemed uneasy. I didn't blame her, but it was hard to feel too upset on a nice day, with her next to me, knowing that I wasn't really saying good-bye. We had lots of time.

"Race you to the road?" I said.

"You are so going to lose." She took off down Half-Blood Hill and I sprinted after her.

For once, I didn't look back.

The smirk that was covering Tommy's face faded when he turned the page to see the acknowledgments. Instead of mere words of the author praising his friends, publishers, and family, there instead lay the wilted stalk of a forgotten flower.

Tommy's hand shook as he traced the lines of a broken allium.

"The only reason alliums are here is because I planted them."

Tommy looks at him—really looks at him—and sees the pain in his two-toned eyes.

"I know," Purpled says distantly.

Around them, regrown golden grass swirls under a dark red sky.

"TOMMY!"

Brown eyes fill his vision, and the words are muffled—oh, he has his over his ears, and he can't breathe, can't draw air—and it's not like the harsh quick intervals of a panic attack, no, he can't breathe *at all*. He choked on nothing at all as his lungs keened for necessary oxygen that wasn't going into his lungs.

There was an awful sort of fear in his brain that wasn't entirely his—and he knew in the back of his mind that it was Rae—and then another Avian was there, his hands on Tommy's chest, and suddenly he could breathe again; could gasp greedy gulps of air into fluttering lungs and could retch out stomach acid.

Despite whatever had transpired, the dried allium still lay in the last pages of the book, where Tommy had placed it what seemed like forever ago.

"What happened?" he asked hoarsely.

Rae and Sykunno shared a look. "I'm not sure," the female Avian said finally.

"Rae, uh, you shouldn't lie," Sykkuno said.

The door burst open to reveal Niki, messy hair and all, looking around desperately. Rae had already jumped into a slightly protective pose in front of the bed, though she relaxed when Sykkuno tugged on her elbow and pulled her down to sit on the bed.

"Oh my God," Niki said, her voice filled with relief. "I got the notification from Clementine that your heart rate was erratic and your oxygen intake was low and assumed the worst."

Tommy cringed slightly. "Sorry for bothering you," he muttered.

"Hey, no, it's okay," Niki said kindly, though the deep circles under her eyes told her she was dealing with too much and had too little time. "I'm glad you're not dead."

"Panic attack," Rae explained shortly, and Tommy felt another push of *questioning-love* in his head before he shut her away. She flinched slightly, but didn't say anything.

"The vitals seemed a bit harsher than that," Niki said observingly.

"It was of the Avian sort," Rae said, and Niki tilted her head, frowning. "It wasn't anxiety that caused the sporadic breaths, it was himself."

"I didn't know I could do that," Tommy whispered.

"No," Rae agreed. "Most people don't. But it *was* self-inflicted, accidental though it was." She gave Niki a look that Tommy couldn't quite see. "We Avians are powerful, but we do have our downfalls. Mental disorders have always been one of them—usually, we get schooled in it around twelve, but..." she trailed off, and Tommy frowned into the sheets. "I mean, we can self-inflict all this damage, and without another Avian around to stop it, like Sykkuno just did, what's stopping our race from being our own destruction?"

"You know a lot about Avians," Niki said.

"I am one, ma'am," Rae said kindly. "My father lived for forty-seven years, and my mother for seven more after him—against all odds—" She tapped the side of her head. "—we pretended to be Human for many years, Lieutenant Nihachu. I did learn some things that are probably lost to history about Avians."

"What happened?" Tommy asked, throat thick.

"What do you mean?" Rae asked kindly.

"To your parents," he said haltingly. "Why'd they die so early?"

Rae stared at him. Her eyes went wide, and Niki covered her mouth. "Oh," she said. "*Oh*, I forgot you don't know. Well, yeah, species have their drawbacks—I've already talked about a few—but technically, Tommy, according to Avian law—though not Galactic law, as the integrations were dissolved upon the destruction of Avia—you're of age."

"Huh?" he asked stupidly.

"Like, you're an adult, by Avian standards, though I doubt you'll act like seventeen-year-old Avians did back when Avia existed because of your unique situation."

"Avians come of age younger?" he asked, confused. "Why?"

"Because Avians only live forty to sixty years," Rae said, and there was sadness in her eyes.

Tommy blinked in surprise, but couldn't find the will to cry. "It's okay," he said dully. "I'll probably die before I reach twenty."

When he laughed, nobody laughed with him.

pig in a blanket

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year!

*"Humor is mankind's
greatest blessing."*
- Mark Twain

"Tubbo," he said.

The Shulker looked up at him from where he'd been scrolling on a datapad. It was three in the morning, Standard time—neither of them was sleeping, but Purpled was snoring softly in the bunk over and Lani was up helping Niki in the science lab. Drista was probably shooting a phaser at targets in the gym. She'd been doing that lately—hadn't technically been allowed to, but everyone was too tired to stop her.

The investigator was due to arrive in six hours.

Tubbo had a sort of nasty frown on his face, but it wasn't directed at Tommy. His eyes were bloodshot. He looked like he hadn't slept since Tommy had seen him in the Wasteland.

"Can you hack the *L'manburg*?" he asked.

Tubbo tilted his head. "Why?" he asked dully, *carefully*, the thin strand of tentative friendship—a spiderwebs' silk, really—that hung between them thin and ready to snap at every bitten word.

"They won't allow me to see Techno," he mumbled, picking at his fingernail beds. If Purpled had been awake, he would've hit his hand and told him to knock him off—but the only one awake and in the room was Tubbo, a cot over on his right, and particularly unwilling to move. "I wanna see him before they take him."

"I've seen him," Tubbo said, conversationally. "He doesn't act like Technoblade. Like your brother."

Tommy sighed. "I know," he muttered. "But I wanna see what Chroma did to him before those racist fucks take him away."

Tubbo stared at him, brown eyes glinting in the near-darkness. He shifted from where he'd been half-lying down on the sheets to leaning against the pillows. "Fair enough, man," the Shulker said. "But you're not going to like what you see."

"I don't like a lot of things about my life."

Tubbo inclined his head. "Unfortunately, yeah." He opened up a new tab on his datapad—Tommy could see it by the change of brightness on his screen; from a blue-white to a dark grey. "I can't really shut Clementine down, but I can fake an alert in the engineering room."

» Really? «

Tommy laughed nervously, glancing up at the ceiling. "O-oh. Hi, Clementine." He was suddenly glad Purpled was wearing noise-canceling headphones.

» Hello, Thomas Innes. Scheming again? «

"You know me too well."

» You know, technically, I should be reporting this to Captain Philza. «

"Well, good thing you're not," he said, motioning for Tubbo to continue. The Shulker hesitated, but then his fingers started flashing across the screen, typing in codes. "Right?"

» It would be against my programming to lie to my captain. «

"I mean, if you just accidentally forget, it's not really lying."

» ...I cannot forget things, Ensign Tommy. «

"Not with that attitude you can't."

» A lie of omission is still a lie nonetheless. «

Tommy sighed, putting his head in his hands. "I just want to see Technoblade," he said weakly. "They're gonna take him away—I have all the faith in Niki and George and the rest of them, but head injuries are not so easily cured. I just want to see him, Clementine. One last time."

» ...will it benefit your mental well-being? «

There was a hidden resonance there, that meant something, even to an AI who had no real emotions of her own. Tommy took a deep breath. "Yes."

» Command override. Databanks wiped. Order 69-81: codename: TommyInnit. «

"Thank you, Clementine," he whispered, knowing she'd shut a part of herself down in order to keep herself in the dark.

"You'll have a ten-minute gap," Tubbo said, not sounding surprised—just tired. "I'm going to sleep. If you're not back here, that's your problem."

"I know," he said, standing up, and not bothering to put his boots on his socked feet as he padded over to the door and pressed his thumb to the scanner so it opened. Usually, that would send off a notification to Niki and Philza, but in theory, it wouldn't. "Thank you, Tubbo."

The boy didn't respond as he put his datapad on his desk and lay down, pulling the covers over his body until only the crown of his head showed. Tommy frowned sadly before he left, the door shutting automatically behind him.

It was oddly familiar to the time he wandered the halls barely two days earlier; though that time had been without a purpose, and there had been a weapon and a decision at the end. This time his purpose was a person, and they'd be damned if anyone tried to stop him.

It was three in the morning as Tommy stepped in bootless feet down the cool-tiled hallways, hands clasped firmly behind his back, eyes searching every expanse, every T in the hallway for other people. Once, Sapnap walked down a passage intersecting his, and Tommy had to duck into a

doorway, squeezing his eyes shut. It was just a patrol—something Sapnap and his group did every night—and it had made the Blazeborn lax, no less, to see nothing for days upon end.

So he didn't look.

And Tommy wasn't found.

He took the emergency stairs one careful step at a time, holding his breath part of the way, and didn't let any singular emotion rise too much in him, keeping a mental grasp firmly on the barrier that untwined his emotions from a currently-asleep Valkyrae. He'd heard what she'd done—how her compass to him had found Techno and him on a beach of some moon-planet with an empty base—Chroma had escaped.

Again.

He wasn't particularly surprised, mind. Chroma was a slippery bastard. Always had been. He'd be until the day he died—which preferably would be before Tommy hit eighteen.

If he ever *hit* eighteen.

Tommy pushed those thoughts out of his mind—avoidance, yes, his favorite drink to force away depression—as he shoved himself against a wall, glad, suddenly, for the small inlets that a skinny boy such as himself could fit into. Hannah, in her Elytrian glory, with scarlet wings that sort of reminded him of blood far more than roses; despite the fact her surname was the latter, came walking past, her hands shoved into the pockets of her uniform. She, like Sapnap, had grown a bit languid in her searches—and besides, none of the things that were hunting the crew members could fit in the small walled inlets.

So she walked past, and Tommy was violently reminded of the music from some old Terran spy movie Lani had binged—and that had woken him up. He let out a small breath when she rounded the corner, and Tommy crossed the hall to the cell door—it wasn't in the brig; they would do that to Techno, instead it was a glorified cell that had all the safety of a regular cell. He scanned his thumbprint on it the door holder.

› Access denied. ‹

Tommy grit his teeth and turned his finger ever so slightly.

› Access denied. ‹

"For fucks' sake," he muttered, glancing at the wall—and, sure enough, perfect repairs hadn't been made to a panel that was poking out, and he reached up and jabbed his thumb into the sharp edge of a bit of metal, wincing harshly at the sting of pain that ran up his hand and through his arm.

He manually typed in his father's override codes, which nobody had thought to remove from the system. When Clementine had been recovered, her data had been thrown into the ship—which was why the holograms could play; holograms that Tommy hadn't touched except that one fateful day, and nobody had thought to remove the access codes.

They would after this, if they checked the logs and saw the ones he used. The *rainy day* he'd been saving them for had suddenly become now.

It didn't even occur to him, as he pressed his thumb into the side of the scan pad, where a blood validator had clicked open, and dropped a drop inside it, that the cut had been a refreshing beat to a numb world. It didn't even occur to him, as he watched the panel flash green, and the door unlocked, that things could have gone far worse if he had realized how good bleeding had felt.

Tommy closed the door behind him, adjusting to the far-dimmer room lights of the room—still visible, but lower than the hallway lights—and stared at the other half of a room, where a squircle panel of glass—nothing like the one that had separated him and Technoblade on *that planet*, in *that place*, thank fucking God—showed a small area that had plastic bowls scattered throughout the area and thick blankets covering the ground; no mattress in sight. Which sort of made sense.

It was Technoblade that drew Tommy's attention, the half-Piglin sitting against the wall on one of the blankets, a second one drawn around his shoulders, his normally-neat hair unbrushed and

unbraided, and his skin drawn and pale, deep circles under his eyes. It was Technoblade, whose red eyes snapped up to meet Tommy's, his tusked mouth twisting into a sort of feral growl that made Tommy's heart sink.

But then—a pause. The twist of Techno's lips stopped, and the commander stood up and walked over to the glass, staring at him with intelligent eyes. Tommy stared at him, before padding over to the glass and pressing his palm against it—the only thing between him and his brother half an inch of shatterproof glass.

"Hi, Techno," he whispered and felt the first tears fall from his face.

Techno shook his head, but it was more to shake away a thought than a disagreement. "Shut up," he whispered, and Tommy's jaw dropped because Phil had said that Techno hadn't said a coherent word. And yet here he was, talking. "*Shut up.*"

"What are you talking about, Big Man?" Tommy said in a low voice, his hand slipping from the glass, a shard of hurt entering his heart. "I'm not talking."

"Not *you*," the half-Piglin said in a half growl. "The fuckin' voices in my head." Tommy stared at him. Technoblade tilted his head at him. "They like you. They go away when you come near."

"That's...good," Tommy breathed out. "You know an inspection officer is coming in a few hours to take you away?"

"I...know," Techno said, pausing in his words to hit himself on the side of the head. "I can't...I can't stop myself—the voices are controlling me—"

"Hey, hey, it's okay," Tommy said, and maybe it was the lack of self-love that caused him to make his choice, but he walked over to the door and opened it as well with a simple code, closing it behind him with a locking click that signified his doom. "It's okay, Techno. I'm here."

There wasn't anything separating him and Techno, now. Nothing except the heavy breathing of a half-Piglin and the controlled breaths of an Avian that was far too stupid for his own good. Techno had *shot Dream*. Techno could kill him—and the brother Tommy knew was still in there and would feel the regret for the rest of his life.

But that wasn't how that went.

Instead, Tommy found his head pressed against a muscled chest, and arms wrapped around his back, squeezing his arms to his sides. He felt Techno's chin settle on his head, and together they stumbled over to the pile of blankets until Tommy was tucked into Techno's side, feeling warm and safe.

"The voices like you," the half-Piglin said in a low voice, his slightly-clawed hand reaching up to card a hand through Tommy's hair. "Can you stay?"

An idea flashed through Tommy's mind, quick as lightning and as stupid as all of his other ones. "Emotion," he breathed out. "Emotion staves it away."

"What?" Techno said after a brief pause, his words so quiet that they were just barely a mumble—but Tommy's left ear, just centimeters from his mouth, heard it all.

"Can I..." Tommy licked his lips, suddenly feeling dehydrated. "Can I try something? To make the voices more controllable?"

"I mean, sure, but they won't listen to me..." Techno trailed off.

"It's an Avian bond, big man," Tommy said, a sleepy smile coming to his face as he lifted up his left hand and pressed it against Techno's warm cheek. Pink hair fell over his shoulder as his brother pressed into the hand. "It feeds emotion."

"I'm not an Avian."

"Obviously," he snickered, and Techno snorted, butting his head slightly. "But...can I try?"

"Sure," Techno said, and Tommy closed his eyes, turning to face his brother completely, his last perception two red eyes that looked more loving than angry, at that moment. He pressed both hands

to the side of Techno's head, in pink hair that hadn't been washed in Gods-knew-how-long, slightly above the ear.

Tommy took a deep breath and sunk deep into his mind, his mouth subconsciously letting out notes that sounded suspiciously similar to the lullabies Rae had sung to him to rescue him from the mind of Chroma as he poked at the empty strands where his father and mother's had once lay, and at the gleaming-but-asleep bond that led him to Rae.

Well, not asleep anymore. Tommy winced slightly as Rae's *confusion-questioning-where* flew at him, and he sent back *fine-thinking-sleep* back at her.

Suspicion-coming-where came flying back at him, and Tommy cursed and slammed a barrier between him and the other Avian—but he had a feel for the living bond, and he tried to remember how one had snapped into place between him and Rae so many moons ago.

If Phil and Kristin could have one, he and Techno could too. Sure, Elytrians had mind-weaver-thingy-people and Kristin had been *compatible*, but now that the thought was in his mind he couldn't exactly dissuade it. Tommy let out another breath and drew up two mental strands of *something* that wasn't quite natural, one three times longer than the other, and followed his hands down to Techno's head, where a clouded brain waited for him on the other side of a skull. He wrapped the longer *something* around the half-Piglin's skull—not physically—and it was a bit like attaching a bracer to one's arm; he had to hold it there *and* tie it, which was a feat in itself, but Tommy tied a knot between the shorter *something* that was attached to his hind-brain and Techno's *something*—and then it snapped tight and Tommy gasped, opening his eyes and scrambling backward as voices assaulted his ears and the bond glowed white-pink-gold.

Who's this?

Blood for the Blood God—

—kill destroy hunger revenge—

Tommy shoved *LOVE-FRIENDSHIP-FAMILY* down the bond as hard as he good, knowing that in order to use all his strength that the wall blocking him from Rae had come crumbling down; the female Avian no doubt having felt the crumbs of the emotions he'd sent into Techno's head.

The voices went silent, and it must've not only been on his end because Techno's eyes went very wide.

Silence.

"It's so quiet," the half-Piglin breathed out. "I'd forgotten what true silence sounds like."

Tommy cracked a small smile. "So it worked?"

He found another warm hug waiting for him in answer to his question, and Techno breathed out as Tommy blinked over his shoulder, surprised at his brother's conviction. "Thank you, Tommy," the commander said. "Truly."

Questioning-anger-TELLME flashed at him, and Tommy rolled his eyes and pushed back *fine-alive-see?*—and Rae eventually subsided, appearing to stop pushing. He prayed she wasn't going to check out the medbay.

Techno said, "I felt that," and Tommy started. "Were you talkin'—were you communicatin' with Rae?"

"It isn't really communication," he murmured. "Just emotions."

"Well, thank you anyway, Tommy," Techno said. "The silence is truly blissful."

"No problem, Big Man," he whispered, clutching Techno's commandeering tunic as the half-Piglin withdrew slightly. "I would've hated for you to get sent to an insane asylum because of me."

Techno snorted. "It was hardly your own doing," he said, and then winced. "Shit, are you okay?" His hands traced the bandages that lined Tommy's shoulder and hand, and Tommy withdrew slightly.

"Fine," he said. "Doesn't even hurt."

"Uh-huh," Techno said, even though Tommy *had* been telling the truth. "Come on. We can't really get out until someone comes, can we?"

Tommy grumbled something under his breath and then yelped as a soft blue blanket was plopped on his head. He breathed in its scent—it smelled a bit like Techno's shampoo—and curled into it, and furthermore, into Techno's side, the only thing poking out his head.

He heard a chuckle as his eyes grew heavy, a thick-fingered hand finding its way to card through Tommy's ill-kept hair. "Sleep well, Theseus."

He couldn't even curse Techno out as his eyes drifted shut.

The light was brighter when he awoke, though also dimmer, which made no actual sense until he cracked open his eyes and realized the breath puffing against his face was his own because he was under a white blanket that light trickled through. He was lying on a different blanket, and had one covering his lower back and feet, and he could feel the wall and the corner of the cell he'd fallen asleep in against his skin. Tommy nearly moved his arm to push the blankets aside, but the prickling of skin—and perhaps the warm body that leaned against the wall over his legs, almost *protecting* him, warned him not to proceed.

It was a good thing he hadn't, because Tommy heard a door swing open and swing shut, two pairs of footsteps stepped into the room, one that he recognized through months of hearing—Phil, that was Phil—and one, heavier, with boots that sounded ugly.

If that was possible.

Tommy breathed in. Breathed out. Reminded himself that they couldn't see him—they didn't know he was in here.

Oh, God. He was in so much trouble.

Wait, why *didn't* they know he was in here? The tracker in his wrist was still working, right? He trusted the tech department enough to know a simple tracker wouldn't fail in a *week*.

Unless they did know he was here and had only found out before the inspector came—because that *was* the other pair of footprints; had to be, they weren't familiar in any way—and hadn't had any time to extract him...

Either way, he was completely fucked.

But fortunately, Techno wasn't a mindless monster, and Tommy felt a sense of pride in that. Clumsily—because Techno wasn't an Avian, and their bond was perhaps a bit more one-sided than all of the ones he'd had before—he pressed on the golden knot in his head and sent *love-safe-warm* into it. He felt Techno shift, perhaps in surprise, and then a hand came down on his calf, squeezing it.

To the two people watching, it was nothing more than a shift. To Tommy, it was everything.

"—he's right here," Phil was saying, when Tommy tuned back into the conversation.

"It's not attacking anything," the inspector mused.

"I go by he and him pronouns, please," Techno said, and Tommy wished he could see the expression on Philza Minecraft's face because it must've been *gold*.

"Good to know," Mr. Inspector said tightly. "Captain Philza, if you would please vacate the room...?"

"But—" Phil started.

"It is under *my* jurisdiction—"

"If you touch a hair on his head," Philza said, and only a few times had Tommy ever heard that raw, cold anger from the Elytrian—and one of them had been in the presence of Merikh Rience. "You will wish you never met me."

Tommy, stifling a laugh—even though truly nothing was really *funny*—nearly *heard* the inspector straighten his back, because Phil was *tall*; not as tall as Wilbur or Techno, but certainly taller than Tommy. "Is that a threat, Captain?"

There was a momentary pause.

"Only if you make it one, Inspector," Philza said coldly.

"That goes against Galactic Laws!" the Inspector screeched, even as the door opened and Phil's wings ruffled, getting ready to shift through a narrower doorframe. "You cannot threaten—"

"I would *never* threaten you," Philza said. "Isn't that right, Clementine?"

» Quite right, Captain. «

Tommy heard Techno's quiet snort as the Inspector was left a sputtering mess. "This is—that A.I is against the law—"

"She doesn't have emotions," Philza interrupted. "She only follows the orders of her superiors and those who...hack her code." There was a quiet pause, and Tommy shrunk slightly from where he was hidden under the blankets.

"I'll have you discharged for this," the Inspector said, but he sounded more whiny than scary. "You can't do this!"

"Try me," Philza said coolly. "You might take my first officer, *my son*. But you will never take the *L'manburg* from its commanding officers—from *me*. You can fucking try, Inspector, but you will never succeed."

"Legally, I am your superior officer—"

"You have never fought a battle in your life," Phil said, and Tommy, right there and then, had another reason to add to his notes on why Philza Minecraft was the captain of the *L'manburg*. "You have never shot a gun. You have gone through *nothing* compared to what my crewmates and I have gone through. I looked up your file before you arrived. You are nothing more than a politician among the rich. We are listening to you, *Inspector*, because I believe that we would rather be viewed on the side of the Galactic Rebellion—we don't need a fourth side in this horrible conflict."

"Fourth?" the Inspector squeaked, sounding terrified.

Philza ignored him. "This is all for show," he said, sounding sort of menacing. "If you take him, we will get him back. Oh, no blood will be spilled—we're not evil—but we have some of the youngest and most brilliant minds on this ship. We have our strengths, and they make up for all the weaknesses. You may take him, Inspector, but mark my words, the day you do starts a countdown to getting him *back*." Tommy thought the Inspector might've squeaked again. "Good day."

The door slammed shut. Techno snorted again.

"Are you—are you *laughing* at me?" the Inspector demanded, turning back towards the cell and Techno.

"No," Techno said dryly. "I'm laughin' at an idiot." There was a pause. "Oh, wait, that is you."

The sarcasm was clearly missed, and Tommy poked a finger through the folds of the blanket in order to make an eyehole. What he saw didn't particularly scare him—some Human in a red uniform with slicked-back greying hair—around forty or fifty, maybe—with an empty holster at his side and tall shiny boots that made Tommy want to spit on them to get a little dirt on them.

"Right," the Inspector said, perturbed. As Tommy watched, he cleared his throat. "Well, I have a few questions to, uh, ask you."

"Are you new to this job?" Techno asked. "You seem to be stammerin' a lot."

"I've never dealt with one of your kind before; forgive me if I'm a bit disturbed." Now *that* was xenophobic, if the biting tone behind it meant anything.

"You mean a Feline?" Techno's dry tone had taken a sharp one, and Tommy really wanted to punch the Inspector in the face.

"No, I meant a Piglin."

"I'm half of both."

"Clearly one of them dominates your...physique."

"If you'd let me out of this cage, I'll show *you* physique."

"Was that a threat?"

"You don't seem to be able to discern threats very well, for being a government official that is currently part of a galaxy-wide war." Techno shifted slightly. "So yes, since you can't read tone and diction, I'm sure I can tell you. *Yes, that was a threat.*"

The Inspector sniffed. "*Threatens...people...in...power...*" he muttered, and Tommy saw his fingers flashing across a datapad.

"I do that all the time," Techno said, amused. "It's not exactly a sanity issue."

"*Undeniable...sarcasm...in...serious...situations...*"

"That's on my file too. You should send this to the Rear Admiral. I'm sure he'll be real happy."

"No...respect...for...positions...of...power..."

"I'm an anarchist."

There was a pause. Tommy stifled a snicker as he saw the Inspector freeze.

"Defendant...thinks...it—"

"He. Please respect my pronouns."

"Fine— Defendant...thinks... he ...is ...part ...of ...Old ...World ...Government..."

"It's a political philosophy. Hey, speakin' of the Terran Old World Government, you should read the book 'Surrounded by Idiots' by Thomas Erikson. It has a passage in it about abrasive manner towards colleagues."

"...assumes ...superiors ...to ...be ...equals..."

"Bruh."

"...uses...language...not...acceptable...for...formal...conversations..."

"Are we done yet?"

"No," the Inspector said shortly. "You don't seem to be as reported three days ago."

"Yes, I got better."

"What happened?"

"I was sick."

"No, what *happened*?"

"Can't remember," Techno said flippantly. "Sickness gives me amnesia. It's a Piglin thing."

"Aren't Felines naturally immune to most diseases?" the Inspector said through gritted teeth. Tommy quite hoped the datapad pen in his hand would snap through his white-knuckled fingers.

"Bruh, even if I need readin' glasses, that's only under bad lightin'," Techno said. "You wrote down Piglin. Nothin' about my other half. I have no idea what you're talkin' about. If I knew better I'd call you out on your blatant discrimination of my species, who were formally accumulated into the Galactic Rebellion about sixteen years ago—you'd have taken a class on my ancestors."

"I think we're quite done here," the Inspector said.

"Yes. I think we are."

"Fuck you, bitch," Tommy hissed through his teeth.

The Inspector paused, and Techno grunted, elbowing Tommy in the side. "Did you hear something?"

"I coughed," Techno said sardonically. "Not bein' a Feline and all that, of course, I'm susceptible to colds."

"Oh, of course," the Inspector said nastily. He left, the door slamming shut behind him.

oh no...my hand...it's broken...

Chapter Notes

Hard to believe that after nearly a year of work, everything is nearly over, isn't it?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*"The face is the mirror of the mind,
and eyes without speaking
confess the secrets of the heart."*

St. Jerome

Tommy poked his head out of the blanket, unable to keep the obvious glee off his face.

"Did you see the look on his face?" he hissed gleefully. "He was *furious*! It was so poggers!"

"I saw, Theseus," Techno said, wry amusement in his tone. "And right when you woke up and when Phil and Sir Stingy came in." Tommy snickered at the Inspector's nickname. "What was that?"

"Huh?"

"The...feelings," Techno said. "They weren't my own—they weren't overpowering, either. Just comforting." He looked slightly uncomfortable, his pink hair—once again braided; when had he done that?—shifting slightly with his shoulders. "What was that?"

"That was an Avian bond," Tommy said. "We can feed emotions to each other. Phil 'n Kristin are different, 'course. They can, like, transmit thoughts and shit."

"Can I do it back?"

Tommy blinked. "I—I don't know," he said honestly. "I've never heard of anyone bonding with a non-Avian before."

"Ah," Techno said. "Well, I'll set the precedent. Not like I haven't done that before." He grinned wryly, and Tommy knew he was talking about his position in the Galactic Rebellion and aboard the *L'manburg*.

Tommy opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off sharply when the door banged open again. He squeaked and grabbed the blanket, scooching into the corner and wrapping it around his head and body, and praying that a really-angry-surprised-looking Philza Minecraft didn't see him. Techno glanced at him, an eyebrow raised, but didn't question it.

"Techno," Phil breathed out.

"Phil."

"You're...talking."

"What am I supposed to be, gruntin'?" Techno snorted. "Maybe accordin' to Sir Stingy."

"This isn't a joke," Phil said calmly, the dark feathers on his wings ruffling.

"I wasn't makin' one," Techno said, just as calmly.

"What happened, mate?" the captain asked, sounding exhausted.

"Chroma did," Techno said, and Tommy frowned. "His doctors did something that awoke voices in my head that yearned for the spill of blood. It's...a Piglin thing." He sounded too tired to explain more.

"So what stopped that?"

Techno paused, giving Tommy another sidelong look. "He did."

"Who is 'he'?"

"Um, I suppose that would be me, Big Man," Tommy said, and Phil did a double-triple take as Tommy removed the blanket that was covering his head, a sheepish grin plastered on his face.

"*TOMMY?*"

"Uh, no, it's Shroud," he said. "Obviously."

"Who is Shroud?" Techno stage-whispered.

"No clue."

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING IN THERE?" Phil yelled, and Tommy wilted slightly.

Wilbur Soot came stumbling in through the wall, phasing back to his normal self and brushing dust molecules off his uniform. "I heard shouting, what's—oh."

"Yes, *oh*," Phil said.

Wilbur stared at Tommy. Tommy waved at him with a blanket-covered hand. "Well, Tech doesn't seem to be killing him, so we're all in the clear."

"Are you not worried in the slightest—"

"Phil," Techno said patiently, patting Tommy on the shoulder. "I'm not going to turn into a bloodthirsty murderer. Not anymore." He winced. "Which reminds me, I gotta apologize to Dream."

"I think your position back on the bridge should be an acceptable apology enough," Wilbur said, shrugging slightly, his brown eyes unreadable as he glanced at Tommy. "We've missed you."

"Yeah, I've kinda missed my own, non-bloodthirsty thoughts too," Techno said, scratching the back of his head sheepishly as he stood up, dragging Tommy up with him. "Bit of a relief, honestly, when he arrived."

"So," Phil said, sounding pissed. "You just walked into the cell."

"You left the codes in," he whispered.

"I left the—" Phil threw up his hands. "So you thought that it was the right thing to do?"

"No," he muttered, shuffling his feet as Wilbur unlocked the door with the swipe of his hand. Techno planted both his hands on Tommy's shoulders, but didn't step into the conversation.

"Then why did you do it?" Phil asked, patience in his tone as Wilbur swung open the door, a small smile on his lips.

Tommy kicked at nonexistent dust on the cell floor. "I wanted to see Techno," he muttered. "You guys weren't gonna let me."

"Yes, because that isn't something I wanted you, nor any of the other children, to see."

"I've seen worse," he snapped, angry.

"That doesn't mean that you should see your older brother in that state," Phil said.

"That doesn't mean I wouldn't want to have seen why he'd have been taken."

"I meant what I said," Phil pointed out. "We would've gotten him back."

"At what cost?" Tommy whispered.

Phil lifted his chin. "I suppose my rank." Wilbur coughed pointedly, and the Elytrian continued, "*our* status in the Galactic Rebellion."

"If you don't stand for something, then you'll fall for anything," Tommy found himself saying, mouth dry.

"I stand for my crewmates and my family," Phil said stiffly, and this half-argument was getting nowhere. "Who said that?"

"Chroma did," Tommy said, crossing his arms. Everybody in the room stiffened. "Look, I get it, bad guy—I get it most of all, really—but he had solid advice for neutrality."

"Oh, solid advice, hmm?" Wilbur hummed as Tommy and Techno walked out of the cell. "I'm sure he had great advice, of course. For someone that committed mass genocide."

Tommy's eye twitched. "Just because he committed mass genocide doesn't mean he didn't give solid advice. I mean, not anymore, obviously—he's just a bitch now, like when he murdered Ranboo...and Alyssa...and Grian...and Foolish...and the three thousand two-hundred other children...but back when he pretended to care, he wasn't so bad about advice-giving." Phil, Techno, and Wilbur all stared at him. "For a psychopath, I mean."

Techno sighed. "Tommy, I gotta tell you about maybe not listenin' to child abusers that are also mass murderers. Perhaps that's a thought."

"Good one, Techno," Wilbur said.

"He taught me to fly," Tommy pointed out.

"So you think maybe he deserves redemption?" Techno asked, raising a pink eyebrow.

Tommy scowled at him. "Fuck no. What am I, some stupid-ass main character? I'm not fucking forgiving him. He ruined my life." Tommy shivered, sticking his hands in his armpits. He paused in surprise when he felt the warmth of a blanket fall over his shoulders, and Techno reached over and ruffled his hair. "I'm gonna kill him. Or Purpled can pull the trigger first. Depends who's faster."

"Oh," Phil said, surprise coloring his voice.

"You shouldn't be so surprised," Tommy said pointedly, wrapping his fingers in the fluffiness of the blanket and drawing it further around his body.

"I'm not, particularly," the captain said, feathers ruffling.

"You sounded so."

"I was surprised at your conviction, actually," Phil said. "I had a feeling that you or Purpled would be the ones to stab him in the back." Phil tilted his head, blue eyes thoughtful. "Or maybe a phaser."

The door burst open, and Tommy looked over, surprised to see it was Skeppy that burst through the door, one Nihachu at his heels. "TECHNOBLADE!"

Tommy winced at the intensity in the Merling's voice, but smiled all the same.

"Hello, Skeppy," Techno said, a grin tugging at his lips and peeling over his tusks.

"Glad to see you're okay, man," Skeppy said, pushing between Phil and Wilbur, both of whom raised an eyebrow in unison—*like father, like son*, Tommy thought dumbly—and pulling the much-taller half-Piglin in for a hug. Techno accepted it with a slight grimace, patting the shorter Merling on the back awkwardly.

"Sorry about him," Niki said as Skeppy stepped back.

The male Merling scowled. "He's my second-best friend! I'm allowed to do that!"

Philza sighed. "Must we have no decorum on this ship?"

"Then I'd like to know why Tommy's here," Skeppy said cheekily.

"Tommy is not supposed to be here," Wilbur pointed out. "He just managed to cure Technoblade. As much as someone can cure a socially awkward pig."

"Bruh," Techno said. "Don't call me out like that."

"Niki, Skeppy, can you please wait outside?" Phil said. Niki opened her mouth, but he cut her off. "You can look at Tommy and Techno in a bit. I need to talk with them."

"Got it, chief!" Skeppy chirped, punching Techno in the shoulder once before adjusting his nose tube and waving goodbye. Tommy had no idea how the Merling had so much energy in him. Niki dipped her head respectfully and left, throwing Tommy a *you-are-in-so-much-trouble* look before she left.

Tommy pretended it was the cold that made him shiver.

"Tommy, that was really dumb of you," Phil said, as the door shut. "You had no idea what you were getting in to."

"I wasn't going to enter the cell until I saw that he wasn't...you know," Tommy muttered. "I just wanted to see him one last time."

Phil nodded. "Okay. But you have to realize that your actions have consequences. What if Techno had killed you? He'd have to live with that for the rest of his life—I'd have to live the rest of my lives knowing my son died because of stupidity." Phil tilted his head at Techno, and Tommy burned in shame. "No offense, mate."

"None taken," Techno said.

"I understand that my actions have consequences," Tommy said, angry. "I've been living with the consequences of my actions for three years. I get it. I shouldn't have come in. But you didn't see what I saw, and you are not an Avian." He shook his head. "I walked in there because I didn't see some bloodthirsty phaser-shooting guy, I saw my brother. And he didn't hurt me."

"He hurt Dream, and he's known Dream longer than you." Techno looked slightly pained at Wilbur's words, but acknowledged them.

"I know," Tommy said. "But I knew he wouldn't hurt me."

"You can't have known that," Phil said.

"I did," Tommy replied. "I promise you I did."

Phil sighed and looked at him. "Okay, mate. I believe you." And there was no gaslighting behind that, no manipulation, just pure faith in Phil's eyes. "But next time, please tell one of us. As a contingency plan."

"In my defense," Tommy started. "Tubbo knew."

"Oh," Phil said, sarcasm radiating from his voice. "My bad. Tubbo knew. That makes everything better. I suppose Purpled knew too."

"No," Tommy said scathingly. "He's probably sleeping still. He was when I left. If he was awake I'm sure that Rae and Sykkuno would be as well. At that point, *everyone* would know I was missing."

"How did you even leave?" Wilbur asked. "The door was coded—"

"You left me in a room with the Chief Operations Officer."

"...fair enough."

"I just don't understand why you had to let that racist piece of shit—" Phil raised an eyebrow at Tommy. "—into this stupid fucking room."

"Because I was legally obliged to," the captain explained patiently. "I had to say yes so they wouldn't remove my rank, and I was hoping that Techno's issue would be solved in three days. If it didn't...well, we had a contingency plan to rescue him."

"I appreciate that," Techno said dryly.

"So you would throw everything away," Tommy said. "For family."

"Oh, the crew members would be reassigned," Phil said. "They wouldn't get in trouble...I mean, Wilbur and Dream and I might, because we would've orchestrated it, but nobody else would have gotten in trouble." He sounded confused.

Tommy shook his head. "You don't understand," he said.

"Enlighten us, then," Wilbur put in.

"Fine," Tommy said, through gritted teeth. "What about me? Am I not family too?"

Wilbur and Phil threw each other a look. "We would've given you the choice," Wilbur answered eventually.

"I don't care about that," Tommy said. "What about Tubbo? Lani? Drista? This ship is *their home*. Purpled? You expect any other fucking ship to take him aboard, even if his brothers put in a good word? You think that Tubbo, with the marks on *his* record due to not following *your* orders, would get to go aboard any other ship?" Tommy shook his head. "No. He wouldn't. What about Niki and Eret? They're Lani and Tubbo's guardians. But Lani and Tubbo wouldn't be hired, and Niki and Eret would either have to quit being officers or leave them behind to rot like damaged wood after a storm. The *L'manburg* is *my* home. When you choose to throw that away, Phil, you throw away a chance at home for the rest of us who don't have a place to fall back on. You *made* your choice—and you chose your son, sure—family, blah blah blah, but you need to know what you are potentially damaging when you make that choice." Philza and Wilbur both appeared like they hadn't thought about that when they'd made their stupid little 'plan'. "You need to understand that some of us have nothing to fall back on. That *this ship* keeps us together—the six—uh, five of us children together by a single thread." Tommy held out his hand, palm facing to the left, thumb on top. "Like a string on the edge of a knife. Stray but a little, and it will fall." He jerked his hand down sharply. "I love you so much, Techno—" The half-Piglin jerked, looking surprised. "—and I get that the crew members wouldn't have been *punished* for your 'contingency plan' to rescue your commander—maybe they even would have followed you—but how are we supposed to help people if we're not even part of a side?" It was a rhetorical question, and Tommy shook his head, ignoring the golden locks that fell over his eyes. "This—this place—this is *my* home. I don't have another. And you almost gave that away—I didn't even get a say."

"I'm sorry, Tommy," Phil said, his feathers drooping, his blue eyes sorrowful. "I didn't even think about that."

"Try," he said. "Next time. I mean, hopefully, it never happens again—but you are the captain of a starship, Philza Minecraft, and I get that you are not perfect—nobody is perfect—but you have to think about your *entire* crew; each and every person and what they're going through, because you hold jurisdiction over us all, even if some are your sons and another is your wife."

"It won't happen again."

"It will," he said firmly. "We all make mistakes. Some of us more stupid ones than others. You'll make a mistake. I've already made a billion. It *will* happen again." Tommy smiled, then, the barest

hint of forgiveness on his face—because he did forgive Phil—it hadn't been with malice nor manipulation, not like Chroma had once done. "Just make sure not to make the same one again, 'kay?"

"Okay," Philza said, clearly relieved this conversation was drawing to a close. He smiled. "I'm beginning to see why Avians mature at fourteen."

"Nah," Tommy said. "I think we were all forced to grow up too fast." He hesitated. "Love you."

"Love you too," Phil said, and Tommy surged forward and hugged him, sighing into the soft uniform of his adopted father. "What's that translation from Piglish, Tech?"

"Hmm?" the pink-haired commander grunted.

"For you..."

"Oh," Techno said, snapping. "Ờ'fày ãuy'ày e'thày ãrl'dwày. *For you, the world.* It's a formal version of *I love you.*"

"Well, then," Phil said, his hands wrapped around Tommy's back in an all-encompassing hug that Tommy truly never wanted to leave. "I wish Kristin was here too—but for you, Tommy, the world."

"I love you," he said. "You're my family."

He had already lost his first family—or all but one person, really.

He was terrified to lose it all again.

For you, the world.

What would happen to his world if they died?

Tommy watched Niki unwrap the bandages around his hand, even as Ponk and Lani took on the task of doing a couple of brain scans on Techno. Purpled, angry and cold, sat two cots over. Tubbo was nowhere to be found—though, by the lack of worry on Niki's face, he was probably with an adult somewhere.

Apparently nobody had known Tommy was missing until it was too late to do a ship-wide search of him. Purpled had woken up two hours before the Inspector had come, and hadn't raised the alarm. Drista and Lani hadn't returned—they'd been busy. Tubbo had been blissfully silent.

All of this—perhaps it was luck; perhaps it was not—along with the forgotten tracker in Tommy's arm had enabled him to stay in the cell with Technoblade until the Inspector had arrived and left.

There was a scar across the top of his hand. The golden apple, combined with lightning, had made it impossible to not leave a mark, even with the *L'manburg's* state-of-the-art medical bay. It was a red mark, curling from the base of his thumb and up over his first knuckle from the right and to the middle finger, stopping sharply in the first phalanx of his third finger.

"It'll fade," Niki noted softly, when she saw him staring at it. "Can you move it?"

The stiff bandages, and slight tug of pain, had stopped him from trying. Now, with Purpled giving him a sidelong look—curious, even if the boy was still angry—Tommy didn't know if he wanted to try.

"Just curl your hand into a fist," Techno suggested, even as Lani projected a dimensional image of the half-Piglin's brain activity, hologram and all. "Punch something."

"Please don't punch something," Niki said.

Tommy's fingers twitched inadvertently, and he realized what was wrong with his hand, his blood running cold. He curled his fingers in one by one, pretending not to notice the interest of literally everyone else in the room. His pinky finger folded neatly, as did his ring finger, but it was at the middle finger where the problems started. Halfway down, it started shaking badly, though there was no pain, and he couldn't touch the pad of his fingertip to his skin like the other ones.

He could only bend his pointer finger halfway.

He could only bend the last digit of his thumb—the first one was stuck unless he moved the base of his wrist.

"Oh," Niki said, blinking in surprise as she took his hand in hers. "That's...worse than I thought."

"Thanks," he said, mouth twisting in such a way that it was not quite a grimace, and not quite a grin. "What's going to happen?"

Niki glanced over at Ponk, beckoning him over from where he'd been removing wires from Techno's head. The Human in question walked over at Niki's gesture. "I think Ponk might have a better grasp at that than me."

"Huh?" Tommy asked. "I mean, you're cool and all, Big Man, but...why?"

"I have a prosthetic arm," Ponk said, stripping off his gloves and rolling up his sleeve to reveal careful wiring and plated panels.

Tommy's jaw dropped. "I did *not* know that." To be fair, he didn't hang out with Ponk that often, but still...

"It's not exactly something I flex," Ponk said, and Purpled leaned against the wall, shaking his head, a wry grin crossing his face.

"What do you mean?" the magenta-eyed Human grumbled. "You literally have me carry stuff around for you on account of your arm being 'stiff.'"

"Ignore my brother," Ponk said.

"It's what I do best," Tommy said, smirking. He pretended not to see the way that Purpled flipped him off.

"Anyway," Ponk said, sitting down on the bed next to him. "There are two options at the moment. There may be more later, after this bastard war is over, but you have two now." Tommy tilted his head, nodding. "We don't currently have a physical therapist aboard the ship, but..." he trailed off, glancing at Niki, who was currently out of Tommy's field of view. She must've made some gesture because Ponk winced and held out his two hands, one of which was still covered by a soft grey glove—his *left* hand, Tommy noted. Tommy placed his bad hand in Ponk's, and was unable to twitch away with his fingers when the nurse prodded at parts of his thumb uncomfortably. "...but I don't believe that your hand will ever be salvaged with physical therapy. Not enough to make a difference, anyway."

"It is an abnormal injury," Niki cut in. "Healed too late, with golden apples and lightning to boot." She shook her head, pink hair coming slightly out of its bun to fall across her face.

"Yes," Ponk said. "But fortunately you still retain some movement, which is why you have two options instead of the recommended one." He tapped Tommy's palm with his left hand—the hand of the arm he'd lost. "You can keep the hand—you're right-handed anyway, and you can still steer a ship with half a hand—or you can get it amputated, and have a prosthetic limb that'll have a full range of motion, even if it won't have feeling."

Tommy stared at him, jaw dropped. Even Lani had stopped—clearly she hadn't expected that option. Purpled had an eyebrow raised. "*Amputation?*" he said. "You're suggesting I cut off my fucking hand?"

"*You* wouldn't be cutting off anything," Ponk said kindly. "We're heading back to Earth because of..." He grimaced, wincing. "...because of Ranboo, and Commander Technoblade as well, and Earth has far more experienced doctors for surgery than anybody in this room—no offense, Niki—"

"None taken," the Merling said. "They have official instruments, too. Expensive ones that the *L'manburg* could never afford to have of its own. We're more like field medics." Tommy eyed her. She was damn good for a field medic.

"—so they'd do it for you," Ponk continued. "It wouldn't hurt, promise."

"You'd be high," Tubbo added. "On painkillers."

"I'm not worried about the pain," Tommy snapped. "He can't—I can't let *him* take my fucking hand as well as the lives of my friends."

"That's why it's your choice," Ponk said. "You don't have to. After the war is over, maybe you'll be able to stay on Earth or another planet for a while and get some physical therapy. That's not an option now, not unless you want to leave the *L'manburg*." His eyes were searching.

"I don't," Tommy snapped.

"Then you either keep your hand as it is, which is *fine*," Ponk said. "Or you get it amputated, and have a prosthetic fitted for you."

Tommy swallowed, glancing at the floor, and trying to move his thumb and pointer finger—as if it would be healed; as if this were some magical universe. Losing the full-ranged movement of his hand was nothing compared to losing his friends and family, but it still fucking sucked. "How long would that take?"

"We're staying on Earth for about two to three weeks anyway," Purpled spoke up, his arms crossed, and his expression apologetic as Tommy glanced his way. "Got a funeral to plan and shit." He laughed. Nobody else did.

"Amputation takes about ten to fourteen days before you can start practicing with a prosthetic," Lani said slowly. "So you'll have it before we leave, even if you have to keep practicing with it aboard the *L'manburg*. The doctor that'll give you instructions should also pass them on to your doctor, which is Niki, in this case."

"I don't..." Tommy shook his head. "I can't..." He couldn't even finish his sentences.

"Having a prosthetic limb doesn't make you weaker, Theseus," Techno said softly, and Tommy slammed a mental barrier between him and the half-Piglin before his feelings could leak through, who winced softly—apparently he could feel that. Tommy wasn't quite used to keeping a barrier between him and Techno yet—he'd gotten used to keeping one up between him and Rae.

"I don't want Chroma to take something else of mine," Tommy said softly. "He's already taken far too much."

"You could install knives in the tips like claws and rip his throat out," Purpled suggested. Tommy snorted.

"Like you'd let me get that kill before you slit his throat."

Purpled tilted his head. "Fair enough."

Tommy sighed again, reaching up with his right hand to run his hand through his unruly hair. His hand caught onto a braid that he hadn't expected, and he raised his head to look at Techno, who shrugged at him nonchalantly from where the half-Piglin was sitting up on his cot. "Do I have to decide now?"

"No," Niki said, and he let out a breath of relief. "No, of course not. You have all the time in the world, Tommy, though you can't get your prosthetic at *any* time, because we'll be shipping out from Earth for a new mission...and probably a war mission at that." She made a face. "You have all the time in the world to decide."

"Well, that's not that long, is it?" he said, with a smile that was more forced than real. "Thirty years?"

"Let's hope for forty-four," Purpled said, and Tommy inclined his head.

"Hope," he whispered. "Hope is the last thing ever lost."

"Grian used to say that, didn't he?" Purpled asked.

"Yeah," Tommy whispered. "Yeah, he did." He drew his legs to his chest and curled his arms around his knees. "Hope costs nothing."

"Hope is a waking dream," Purpled finished softly, his voice hollow in the air of people who were listening to the anguished song of those lost.

A single thread of hope is still a very powerful thing.

A tear slid down Tommy's face. A second joined it, moments later. It wasn't the first few he'd ever shed for his past friends, and it certainly wouldn't be the last.

Chapter End Notes

This particular chapter was written and finalized in mid-November. Or something like that.

bittersweet home

Chapter Notes

More than a year later of planning and writing, and nine months of posting on ao3 (weekly), we're finally bringing this massive thing to a close.

I'm both happy and sad.

Happy, because Juliet and I will be taking a break for a little bit. DEFINITELY until after finals—we started planning *The Children's Revenge*, the second and final book in this series, but neither of us have had the heart to actually write the first word. Mostly because we know if we get started, we probably won't stop. I think a small break (maybe two months) is in store for us.

Sad, because I'm going to miss laughing over your funny comments Sad, because I'm going to miss seeing my email pile up with comments from ao3, all clamoring for more—sad, because we love sharing our love of writing with you guys, the readers, who love reading it just as much.

Still, everything has an end. Everything has to end as well.

Sincerely,

Aria & Juliet

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*"It is a far, far better thing that I do,
than I have ever done,
it is a far, far better rest that I go to
than I have ever known."*

-Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

It was later, when the doctors were gone, and it was just Techno and Tommy in the room, that Dream and Drista poked their heads in. Drista glanced up at Tommy, but the moment caused Techno to raise his head, and the girl quickly stared at the ground once more, looking embarrassed.

"Techno," Dream said, dipping his head as he leaned against the wall. "Glad to see you awake."

"Glad to see my bullet didn't hit your heart."

"Well, you've always been good at missing."

Techno gave a halfhearted bark of laughter. "I seem to recall a certain duel—"

Dream put his hands up in mock surrender. "Alright, alright. Jeez. No need to hold that over my head every time."

"I'm gonna hold that over your head until the day you die, Dream."

"Good to know," Dream said, running a hand through his blonde hair. "Nice to see you're okay as well, Tommy. Good job taming the beast."

"That's not fair," Techno grumbled, but unlike the Inspector, Dream's tone was teasing and friendly—and in kind, Techno wasn't mad in the slightest. The pink-haired man looked over at Drista, who was still staring at her feet. "Nice shot, kid."

"Wha—huh?" Drista sputtered, looking up. Glancing between the two siblings, Tommy could see the parallels connecting them—the same bright green eyes that glimmered with danger and mysteries; the same blonde hair, the same lines in the corners of their lips that signified the much-needed laughter. "I shot *you*."

"After I shot your brother," Techno said, reaching a hand to tap at where the bandages around his chest had once lain. "That was a hard choice to make." Dream put a hand on Drista's shoulder comfortingly, the younger girl glancing up at her brother. "And a valid one."

"But you're still good," Drista said, eyes glimmering with unshed tears. "And I shot you. I could've killed you."

"You would've had every right to," Techno said, face proud. "For all you knew, I was a traitor. I shot your brother. Sorry about that, by the way." Dream shook his head slightly, acknowledging and passing on the apology, wordless. "Though, I'm glad you didn't go for the head."

"I couldn't," Drista said. "My training—all it was doing was screaming for me to shoot you in the head, but I—I *couldn't*." Her hands were shaking, Tommy noticed, clenched in fists at her side. "You could've actually betrayed us and I still wouldn't have been able to kill you."

"And that is what marks you as good," Dream spoke up, pride in his eyes as he stared down at his little sister. "Nice shot."

"It was more of a reaction," Drista muttered. "Than anything else."

"Than damn good reaction," Techno said. "Thanks for stoppin' me before I actually killed someone."

"No problem," Drista said, finally mustering a smile. "Thanks, Techno. I admit I was scared you would be mad at me."

"In self-defense? Never."

It was later—later at night, past midnight, that Tommy took out Sniff's violin—*his violin*, his mind supplied, but he pushed that aside—and lay it across his sheets.

It was even later than that, after staring around his room, at the evidence of *him*, of what was *his*—of the Percy Jackson book lying open on one of the shelves, a crushed allium between the pages; of the pictures of him and his friends, one of which was dead—of the pictures that Purpled had gotten sent from Pogtopia; terrible quality ones of them and Foolish and Grian and Alyssa—and now Ranboo's name joined the chant of names of the dead in his head—that Tommy tried to play the violin with clumsy fingers that didn't quite work properly.

And when he put it down, not having been able to play a single song properly, Tommy put his head in his hands and wondered if with a prosthetic he'd be able to play his instrument again. Ponk could be a doctor with one arm—maybe he could play the violin again.

Chroma had stolen many things from him. He wouldn't steal his love of music from him too.

Tommy stood up, resolution in his mind, and walked out the door, grabbing his datapad before he left. The door beeped as he left—and he knew it'd sent a message to literally everyone in the ship—but it wasn't like he was going to do anything wrong; not as he walked down the dimly lit hallways to the rec room, where two pianos were—one, older than he was; a grand piano like Tubbo had played what seemed like eons ago in a talent show that he didn't even know who'd won, and the other, his—that Lani and Drista had bought him for his seventeenth birthday.

God, that seemed like forever ago. He'd just reunited with Purpled and Ranboo, just barely met Drista and Tubbo and Lani, and hadn't even known what he would one day consider Phil, Techno, and Wilbur.

The rec room was dark and silent when Tommy entered, datapad in hand. He knew he was probably being watched—somewhere; probably by Clementine. He switched on the light with his left hand, struggling for a bit until giving up and using his ring finger to tap the button.

Tommy sat down on the piano set of his piano heavily, putting his datapad on the music stand. He used his right hand to press down on the keys, wincing slightly at the volume of the notes.

His left hand hovered over the keys, and Tommy took a deep breath before using his wrist to press his fingers down, instead of the muscles in his palm. It worked—to a slight degree, although a singular note he meant to press became two; F and G separately, his thumb and his pointer finger merging the notes into something that wasn't quite harmonious, and Tommy gritted his teeth and concentrated on tilting his left hand correctly to press the keys, because he couldn't quite press down with the first two fingers on his left hand, though fortunately, he can with his middle finger.

It was a simple nursery rhyme he played—slow and steady and not quite right, with stiff fingers that didn't entirely remember how to play, and three besides that didn't work properly. It was one that his father taught him when he was little enough to sit on his lap, watching in wonder as his father's arms curled around his shoulders and made music play from white and black keys.

It had been years since he'd played—*truly* played, if this counted. Every missed note was like a stab to the heart; he winced when he played, once again, G and F in unison when it just should have been F, but his stupid finger wouldn't work correctly.

The melody he played had eight different notes—three using his right hand and five using his left, and it was something he'd been able to play perfectly when he was, like, eight or something—but he couldn't play it now, because time had lost him his ability and so had his fingers, so he skipped notes and backtracked and cursed under his breath when his hand slipped.

The door opened behind him, and Tommy glanced over his shoulder to see Tubbo standing there, leaning against the doorway, the only telltale sign that it was him from Tommy's brief look the flash of chocolate brown hair. It very well could have been Lani, but Lani was asleep and not up in the witching hours of the night. And while Lani wore her hair up in her signature 'space buns', she wouldn't do that now, because she took them out promptly before she went to sleep and then did them again in the morning when she woke up before her shift.

So it was definitely Tubbo, unless someone else on the ship was that short and had that color of hair. Tubbo, piano extraordinaire, watching him fail to play a fucking lullaby at seventeen years of age. Tubbo, Ranboo's Husband. Ranboo, whom he'd *failed*.

The slightly-off-key notes of the piano faded with one final *plink* as Tommy let his hands fall to his lap. He raised his head slightly, staring at a blue-painted wall that was chipping slightly—man, this room looked about as old as Philza Minecraft himself. "What is it?"

And it *was* Tubbo that answered—it *was* his voice that carried over an empty room, full of half-heartedly hidden grief. "You've picked up the piano again." It wasn't a question—more of an observation.

"I can't exactly play the violin," he noted dryly, throwing one leg over the piano seat so he was sitting what could be considered sidesaddle, one foot dangling over each side. Tommy held up his left hand and wiggled it in the air—as much as he could, anyway, what with it being partially

paralyzed and shit. "And I wanted to make music. But I guess Chroma's taken that away from me alongside everything else." He knows he sounds bitter—that maybe he should be glad to be alive—but he's resentful that Chroma has taken so much from his life; including, now, his short love of making music.

Tommy heard a sigh, and then started slightly when a body settled against his back, Tubbo's spine curving against his, though the Shulker was far shorter than him and the top of his head hit Tommy's neck. "I think you did good," the boy suggested, leaning his head to rest against Tommy. "For not having played in a while and while having a physical disability, now." Tommy snorted, and Tubbo elbowed him in the ribs. "Hey! It's true. You're one of the strongest people I know."

"Bullshit," Tommy said instantly.

"You can't call bullshit on *my* opinions."

"Your opinions are shit. Wrong. You're a wrong'un."

Tommy heard another sigh, and he closed his eyes, waiting for Tubbo's words and praying they wouldn't be any more biting accusations, though he thought that the anger was out of Tubbo's system by now—or, at least, the anger against his friends.

"How do you do it?"

"What?" he blinked. "Play the piano one-and-a-half-handed? I just gotta tilt—"

"No," Tubbo said, effectively cutting him off. Even though Tubbo couldn't see his face, Tommy raised an eyebrow. "Live. When people in your life—people you love—have passed."

"Thanks, Tubbo," he muttered, not actually mad. "Way to rub it in."

"I didn't mean it like that!"

"Oh, I'm sure you meant it like 'hey, dude who had four besties die and his parents and aunt, as well as another one of his friends that he made at school, how do you do it?'. I'm *sure* you meant it like that."

"To be fair, it sounds worse when you say it like that."

"That's exactly how you said it."

"I did *not* phrase it like that!"

Tommy rubbed his face as Tubbo fell to silence. "It's hard," he admitted. "Impossibly so. People who spout bullshit like 'as long as there is love and memory, there is no true loss' are pricks who have never actually experienced losing someone." He let out a breath. "Losing someone...*grieving*—is immeasurable. Always will be. There is no way to put it to words. No way to scream it into the universe. No way to cry hard enough that you get past their death. But you do it anyway, because something is better than nothing."

"Does it get better?" Tubbo whispered.

"No," Tommy said, and Tubbo let out a small choked sound. "It doesn't. But it gets easier. You learn to deal with the hole in your heart."

"I never thought that grief would feel so much like fear," Tubbo murmured.

"I think it is, in a sense," Tommy said consideringly. "Afraid of losing someone you love." He nudged Tubbo. "Even we already have. We're so afraid and scared that they won't be there anymore—that you'll wake up and got to breakfast and they'll never be there again, even if it's true. You sit up in bed and you pray that the last few days—weeks, *years*, even—have been a dream." Tommy ran a hand through his hair, snagging on a knot. "Sometimes I wish that I was nine again, and I'd wake up and Puffy and Sam would be there, right by my side, like it was meant to be."

"But then you wouldn't know us," Tubbo argued gently.

"I know," he said. "But that's life, innit? If I woke up on the *H.M.S Fran*, and I knew my father and aunt again, I *would* never know you. Maybe you'd be a figment of my imagination, or I'd never meet you, because my father took on long-term missions. But I'd never meet Chroma. I'd never lose my first family. I'd never see the remaining Avians die in an explosion—besides Rae and Sykkuno, that is. I'd never learn to lead. I'd never create a rebellion. I wouldn't be who I was today."

"But you wouldn't have the kilometers of trauma that you do today," Tubbo finished.

"Way to put it eloquently," he snorted. "But yes. I lost so much, and gained so much as well. They don't balance, of course. That's not how life works. In fact, the bad far outweighs the good. You can have a thousand praises and still be put down by one mean comment. That's how it works. So all the—" Tommy took a deep breath. "—child abuse, emotional manipulation, torture, genocide, kidnapping, starvation, experimentation, sorta-kind-maybe suicidal thoughts and the death of my friends outweighs the fact that I met everyone on the *L'manburg*, that I found Sykkuno and Valkyrae as Avians; that Phil adopted me and shit—that I attended school for even a little bit and met some people who I'll never forget." Tommy snorted. "Feels like I'm fucking constantly in survival mode."

Tubbo was silent for a moment, before he sniffled, and Tommy realized he was probably crying. "I miss Ranboo," the Shulker murmured. "It's hard to eat with him gone."

Tommy remembered Ranboo's slight issue with that on the *Benecia* as well. As well as Tubbo's clinginess. "You used to split your food, right? Half and half?"

"Yeah," Tubbo sighed, and there was a shifting of the fabric as the smaller boy drew his knees to his chest. "I guess I developed a taste for Enderian food."

Tommy gagged slightly. "I could *never* ." He smiled, after that. "I suppose that was why he was your best friend. Or maybe it was because he didn't remember me until close to the end."

Tubbo snorted and then clapped a hand over his mouth. "Can I laugh at that?"

"Wouldn't Ranboo, wherever he is, have wanted us to?" Tommy said gently, spinning around in the chair to look at Tubbo, who was glancing over his shoulder with wet eyes. "I know I would have, if I died."

"Yeah," Tubbo said, coughing slightly. "It's hard to believe he's gone."

Tommy nodded, bringing his arms around to hug Tubbo closer to his chest. The smaller boy let out a choked sob as his head hit Tommy's sternum, and Tommy tilted his chin back and tried not to let the tears fall. It didn't quite work; salty water sliding down his cheek and plopping into Tubbo's fluffy brown hair. "You'll see him again."

"You think so?" Tubbo breathed into his chest.

"I mean, Avians believe so," Tommy said. "What's left of our religion, anyway."

"Do *you* believe that, though?" Tubbo asked curiously.

Tommy smiled. "Yeah," he said, with finality. "I do. We'll see them again. Ranboo. Grian. Alyssa. Foolish. Sniff. Sam. Puffy. Clara."

"My parents," Tubbo snorted weakly. "You know, I thought I didn't miss them, because they didn't pay attention to me because I wasn't going to become some medical officer—no offense to Lani, of course—but now...now, of all times, I do. I thought I'd grown out of that."

"They're your parents," Tommy said. "No matter what they've done, you'll wish for them—or a version that they could have been, anyway."

"They weren't awful," Tubbo said. "They just...weren't there. They didn't hit me or anything."

"That didn't mean they were good parents," Tommy said quietly. "That's just an extremity. It's not one or the other—it's a whole scale. You can resent your parents and not hate them at the same time."

"But they're my parents."

"That doesn't mean anything," Tommy said. "You don't owe them anything because they're your parents. You don't owe them love or affection—they have to earn that. Emotions are earned—and sometimes they're said out of anger or sadness because of another." Tubbo drew in a short breath. "But it's okay, because the people that love you understand that you don't mean it—even if you shouldn't have said it."

"I'm sorry," Tubbo sobbed. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

"It's okay," he said softly; closed his eyes, and let the tears trail their way down his face, carving familiar paths in grooves, like the Grand Canyon on Terra. "It's okay. It gets easier. Promise."

"A friend once told me that grief is immeasurable."

Tommy let out a breath from where he was standing in the corner of the graveyard, under old cherry blossom trees, his feet pressing down on greened grass. August's end was approaching in California—the trees were a light golden color, and the five pm sun hung heavy in the sky, as if burdened down by a great weight. His suit—black and white, with an allium pinned to the lapel, given to him by Purpled—felt stiff; and he knew he would never wear it again, no matter how expensive it had been.

Beside him, the crew of the *L'manburg* and some of the *Mira* stood in groups of mourning black—and even though that was a Human burial custom, there were no Enderians that Ranboo knew who could lead an Enderian one. It was the thought that counted, anyway.

They didn't have a body, but Ranboo would have a headstone, and Purpled was arguing with the Pogtopian stand-in government and the Galactic Rebellion to allow them to move the other members of the Children's Rebellion to rest beside Ranboo—together, even in death.

It was Tubbo that spoke, now, his eyes singing the song of unshed tears, and it was Tubbo that gave Ranboo his final goodbye—and Tommy had helped him write his speech, and knew that their words were all intertwined in there—but Ranboo had been Tubbo's friend best of all, and so it was

his words that would end the mournful procession, and it would be his words that finalized the death.

"How lucky I am to have had someone that makes saying goodbye so hard," Tubbo continued softly, his voice still heard against the silence of the August leaves, and Tommy lowered his chin and stared at the grass and wished for it to stay green and alive—that the grass around Ranboo's grave would never turn brown; never be of Pogtopia. "Ranboo was many things to many people. A hope. A friend. Maybe a son, once, even if they aren't here anymore. A husband." The Shulker's lips curl into a smile, and Tommy finds himself leading the laughter that rings out in the private clearing.

Barely over the tips of the trees, the Golden Gate Bridge shone with sunlight, and he was reminded of another funeral, another speech, another lost friend.

"He supported me—*us*—when we needed it. He listened when he wanted to. He was one of the strongest people I know—*knew*—" Tubbo's hands clenched into fists, and Tommy closed his eyes, the tears gathering at the ends of his lashes falling onto greenery. It seemed he was always crying, nowadays. "—and he didn't deserve the end he got."

Maybe it was shame that curled in his gut, then.

"Somebody once said, 'sometimes, it is necessary to sacrifice your dreams for the sakes of others'. And that was Ranboo's final decision—a sacrifice meant for something better, because he was always better than all of us."

Beside Tommy, Purpled nodded. Techno lowered his head, ashamed, and Phil put up a hand on his eldest son's shoulder, consolidating. Tubbo's words weren't accusing—he didn't *blame* Techno; nobody did, even if the commander took the failure of someone dying on his shoulders.

"I wish that we could have had more." People were crying—Tommy was crying—and maybe the grass would die from the saltiness in the dripping water; maybe this was Pogtopia all over again. "More time. I wish I'd had more than two years with my best friend. I wish I knew what we could've done, what we could've *become*. Because grief is the price we pay for love, is it not? A boy dying too soon—who went through too much—" At that, Tubbo's eyes met Tommy's, and flickered to Purpled on his right. "—and received, in his life, too little. How can I speak? How can I say things when his life was too short? When it was taken from him? How can I stand here and speak for someone of his stature? When he wanted so little, and gave his laughter so lightly?"

How can I stand here? Tommy asked himself. When this is all my fault?

"Because grief is the price we pay for love."

I'll never hear him laugh again, Tommy thought, and let his tears fall because of it. Never hear him make a stupid joke without swearing. Never make fun of his height. I'll never see him again.

"The song has ended, but the melody lingers on."

And the universe said I love you, because you are love.

"Hi Mom," he whispered, later at night, just after sundown, when it was colder and even his black blazer did not protect him from the wind. "Dad. Puffy." A small pause. "Clementine."

They didn't answer—it was stupid of him to think they would have. Their gravestones were plain—bland; because everyone they were close to, save him, had died aboard the *H.M.S Fran*. Just a block of curved concrete, with titles that didn't matter and stardates that he remembered clear as day.

Captain Samuel Innes of the H.M.S Fran.

Captain-Commander Cara Puffy of the H.M.S Fran.

Lieutenant Clara Innes of the H.M.S Fran.

Clementine Innes.

Tommy traced the engravings of the graves and wondered who had made the one for his little sister, whom he had never truly seen, and never exchanged words with. If they had cried over a small

gravestone for a child that had never seen the light of a planet. He wondered who had stood here—what sort of procession it had been; if Rae and Sykkuno and Phil had stood here, once, with umbrellas because it had been springtime on Terra at that time and probably raining—if anyone had made a speech like Tubbo had.

"I miss you," he whispered.

I'm glad you found someone else, Sam would have said.

Miss you too, duckling, Puffy would have whispered, and maybe he would have braided her white hair with clumsy, uneducated fingers.

He didn't know what his mother would have said. He'd never known her well enough.

Clementine hadn't lived long enough to do more than cry.

"Is this destiny?" he whispered into the darkness. "Is this what I'm meant to become?"

If the wind could answer, it didn't speak to him.

Past midnight, on a bench in California, five children sat facing east and watched the stars and the rising crescent moon.

"Six is a cursed number," Purpled had said, once, and Tommy thought he was right, now.

"Is this the end, then?" Tubbo whispered, breaking the hours of silence.

"I think it's the beginning," Purpled said, leaning back against the bench, his arms propped behind his head.

"The beginning of what?" Drista asked, her voice wrecked, presumably from crying so much.

"Revenge," Purpled answered. "*Our* revenge." He shared a look with Tommy. "Chroma *will* die."

"I'll fucking cave in his skull with a nuke if I must," Tubbo declared angrily. "He killed Ranboo."

"He killed many people before Ranboo," Purpled corrected softly, and Tommy elbowed him. "But Ranboo most recent of them all, yes."

"Besides," Tommy put in finally. "Everything has an end."

"Even love?" Tubbo asked him.

"*Especially* love."

And it was there, on a bench in California, with white sand down a cliff five hundred feet below them, that the five of them looked up with sad eyes at the stony moon and the cold dance of infinite stars.

For it was *an* end, but it wasn't *the* end.

End of Book 1

Chapter End Notes

We love you guys! <3

Remember to subscribe to the Children of the Stars series if you want to get notifications on when The Children's Revenge comes out! Follow me on twitter for more in-depth details (I usually leak a few things, even if you guys don't know what chapter it is or what it's for)

I can't believe it's over.

For now. ;)

End Notes

twitter :)

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please remember to leave a kudos

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